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The Island Pharisees

By

John Galsworthy

(John Sinjohn)

Author of 'A Man of Devon,' 'Villa Rubein,' etc.

'But this is worshipful society'

KING JOHN



London
William Heinemann

1904

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PART I
THE TOWN

CHAPTER I

SOCIETY

A QUIET, well-dressed man named Shelton, with a brown face and a short, fair beard, stood by the bookstall at Dover Station. He was about to journey up to London, and had placed his bag on a corner seat of a third-class carriage.

After his long travel, the flat-vowelled voice of the bookstall clerk offering the latest novel sounded delightful—delightful the independent answers of a tremendous guard, the stolid farewells of a man and his wife. The loose-jointed porters trundling their barrows, the grayness of the station, and the sulky good-humour that clung about the people, the air, the voices, all gave him a sensation of positive comfort. Meanwhile he vacillated between the purchase of ‘Market Harborough,’ which he had read, and thought he was certain to enjoy a second time, and Carlyle’s ‘French Revolution,’ which he had not read, and was doubtful of enjoying; he felt that he ought to buy the latter, but did not like giving up the former. While he hesitated thus, with his hands in his pockets, and on his face a look of composure conferred rather by education than by nature, his carriage was filling; so, hurriedly buying both books, he took up a position from which he could defend his

rights. ‘Nothing,’ he thought, watching his bag, ‘shows people up like travelling.’

The carriage was very full, and placing his bag in the rack, he unfolded his paper. At the moment of starting, however, yet another passenger, a girl with a pale face, entered.

‘I was a fool to go third,’ thought Shelton, taking stock of his neighbours from behind the journal.

They were seven in number. A grizzled rustic sat in the far corner; his empty pipe, bowl downwards, seemed to jut like a handle out of his visage all-bleared with the smear of nothingness that grows over the faces of those who pass their lives in the full current of hard facts. Next to him, a red-faced man with broad shoulders and a gray-haired, hatchet-faced person were discussing the state of their gardens; and Shelton watched their eyes till it occurred to him how curious the look in them was—a watchful friendliness, a species of allied distrust, and their voices, cheerful, even jovial, seemed to carry with them an echo of caution. His glance strayed off to the seat opposite, and almost rebounded from the semi-Roman, slightly cross, and wholly satisfied countenance of a stout lady in a thunder-and-lightning dress, who was reading the *Strand Magazine*, while her sleek, plump hand, freed from a black glove, and adorned with a thick gold watch-bracelet, reposed upon her thigh in a capable curve. A younger, bright-cheeked, self-conscious female was sitting next her, the expression in whose eyes drew Shelton’s attention to the pale girl who had just got in.

‘There’s something about that girl,’ he thought, ‘that they don’t like.’ Her brown eyes certainly looked frightened, and her clothes had a foreign cut. He

withdrew his gaze, and suddenly met the glance of a pair of eyes opposite ; prominent and blue, they stared earnestly for a second with refined roguery from above a thin, lopsided nose, and were subtly averted. They gave him the impression that he was being at once judged, mocked, enticed, and initiated. His own gaze did not so easily fall ; this sanguine face, with its two days' growth of reddish beard, long nose, and full, ironical lips, puzzled him. ‘What a cynical face !’ he thought, and then, ‘What a sensitive face !’ and again, ‘What a cynical face !’

The young man to whom it belonged sat with his legs parted at the knees, his dusty trouser-ends and boots slanting back under the seat, his yellow finger-tips crisped as if rolling a cigarette. A peculiar air of detachment encircled his youthful, shabby figure, and not a vestige of luggage decorated the rack above his head.

The frightened girl was seated next this pagan personality ; it was possibly the lack of ‘respectability’ in his appearance which caused her to select him for her confidant.

‘Monsieur,’ she asked, ‘do you speak French ?’

‘Perfectly.’

‘Then perhaps you can tell me where they collect tickets ?’

The young man shook his head.

‘No,’ said he, in good French, ‘I’m a foreigner.’

The girl sighed. Shelton could not help listening.

‘But what is the matter, mademoiselle ?’ asked the young foreigner.

The girl did not reply, twisting her hands on an old brown bag in her lap. A momentary uneasiness had

stolen over the carriage, such as steals upon animals at the first scent of danger, and all eyes were turned towards the figures of the two foreigners.

'Yes,' broke out the voice of the red-faced man assertively, 'he was a bit squiffy that evening—old Tom.'

'Ah!' replied his neighbour, 'he would be.'

Something seemed suddenly to have united their eyes and annihilated that mutual look of friendly distrust. The plump, sleek hand upon the thigh of the Roman-faced lady curved convulsively, and the movement corresponded to a sensation in Shelton's heart. It was almost as if hand and heart feared to be asked for something.

'Monsieur,' said the girl, with a tremble in her voice, 'I am very unhappy; can you tell me what to do? I had no money for a ticket.'

A flicker passed over the young foreigner's face.

'Yes?' he said; 'that might happen to anybody.'

'I don't know what they will do to me,' murmured the girl.

'Don't lose courage,' said the young man, sliding his prominent eyes from left to right, and finally resting them on Shelton, 'although I don't as yet see your way out.'

'Oh, monsieur!' sighed the girl, and though it was obvious that no one but Shelton understood their conversation, a shiver of withdrawal ran round the carriage.

'I wish I could assist you,' said the young foreigner, 'but unfortunately——' He shrugged his shoulders, and again his eyes rested on Shelton.

The latter involuntarily put his hand in his pocket.

‘Can I be of any use?’ he asked.

‘Certainly, sir; you could render this young lady the greatest possible service by lending her the money for a ticket.’

Shelton abstracted a half-sovereign, which the young foreigner took. Passing it over to the girl, he said:

‘A thousand thanks—*voilà une belle action!*’

The misgivings which follow the bestowal of casual charity crowded up in Shelton’s mind; he was ashamed of having them, and again ashamed of not having them, and stole covert looks at the young foreigner, who had fallen into conversation with the girl in a language that might have been Flemish. In spite of its essential vagabondism, the fellow’s face showed a subtle spirit, an ironical fortitude strange to the normal civilized countenance, and in turning from it to the other inmates of the carriage, Shelton was conscious of a sense of revolt—a contempt for, and questioning of, something he could not define. Leaning back with half-closed eyes, he tried to diagnose this new sensation. He found it disconcerting that the behaviour of his neighbours lacked anything he could lay hold of and secretly abuse. They continued their conversation upon their own affairs with admirable and slightly self-conscious phlegm, yet he knew as well as if each one had taken him into confidence that the shady incident at his end of the carriage had shaken them privately. Something unsettling to their notions of propriety—something dangerous and destructive of their complacency had occurred, than which nothing is less forgiveable. Each had a different way, humorous, philosophical, contemptuous, sour, or sly, of expressing this resentment, and it was only one of those rare flashes of insight

vouchsafed to men when they brave the perils of introspection which caused Shelton to see that at the bottom of all their minds, even of his own mind, the feeling was the same. Precisely because he shared their resentment was he angry with them and angry with himself, and, as though fascinated, his eyes became glued to that plump, sleek, ringed hand resting on the thigh. The insulation and complacency of its pale skin, the passive self-righteousness of its curve, and the prim separation from the others of the fat little finger, acquired a wholly unaccountable importance. It embodied the attitude of his fellow-passengers, the attitude of Society, for he knew that, however repulsive the notion to his aristocratic mind, every assemblage of six or eight persons, even in a third-class carriage, contained the kernel of Society.

But being in love, and recently engaged to be married, Shelton had a right to be immune from dissatisfaction of any kind, and he returned to the memory of the cool, fair face, the quick movements, and brilliant smile that now in his probationary exile haunted his imagination ; he took out his fiancée's last letter, but the voice of the young foreigner addressing him in his rapid French caused him abruptly to put it back.

'From what she tells me, sir,' he said, bending forward to be out of hearing of the girl, 'hers is a very unhappy case. I should have been only too glad to help her myself, but, as you see'—and he made a gesture by which Shelton observed that he had parted from his waistcoat—'I'm not Rothschild. She's been abandoned by the man who brought her over to Dover under promise of marriage. You see'—by a subtle flicker of his eyes he indicated the two ladies who had edged

away from their neighbour—‘they take good care not to let their garments touch her. They are virtuous women. How fine it is to have virtue, monsieur ! and finer to *know* you have it, especially when you’re never likely to be tempted.’

Shelton was unable to repress a smile ; and when he smiled his face grew soft.

‘Haven’t you observed, sir,’ went on the young foreigner, ‘that those who by temperament and circumstance are worst fitted to pass judgment are always the first to condemn ? The judgments of Society are always childish, seeing that it’s composed for the most part of individuals who’ve never smelt the fire. And look at this : those who have money run too great a risk of having to part with it if they don’t accuse the penniless of being rogues and imbeciles.’

Shelton was startled, not only by an expression of philosophy from an utter stranger in poor clothes, but at this singular wording of his own thoughts ; stifling his sense of the unusual for the sake of the queer attraction the young man inspired, he remarked :

‘I suppose you’re a stranger over here ?’

‘I’ve been in England some months, but not yet in London,’ replied the other. ‘I count on doing some good there—it’s about time !’ An ironical smile, pathetic and bitter, appeared for a second on his lips. ‘It won’t be my fault if I fail. You are English, sir ?’

Shelton nodded.

‘Forgive my asking ; your voice lacks something I’ve nearly always remarked in the English : a kind of—*comment cela s’appelle*—cocksureness, which comes from your great national quality.’

‘And what is that?’ asked Shelton, with some curiosity.

‘Complacency,’ replied the young foreigner.

‘Complacency!’ repeated Shelton; ‘do you call that a great quality?’

‘I should rather say, monsieur, a great defect in what is always a great people. You are certainly the most highly-civilized nation on the earth, and you suffer a little from the fact. If I were an English preacher my one desire would be to prick the heart of your complacency.’

Shelton thrust his hands into his coat-pockets, and pressed them against his sides as if to force himself to consider this impertinent suggestion.

‘Hum!’ he said at last, ‘you’d be unpopular; besides, I don’t know that we’re any worse than other nations.’

The young foreigner made a gesture as if he deferred to the opinion.

‘In effect,’ said he, ‘it’s a sufficiently widespread disease. Look at these people here’—and with a rapid glance he indicated the inmates of the carriage, who were very average persons—‘what have they done to warrant their making a virtuous nose at those who don’t walk as they do? That old rustic, perhaps, is different—he never thinks at all—but look at those two who are always occupied with stupidities like the price of potatoes, the prospects of hops, what George is doing, a thousand things of that sort—you’ve only to look at their faces; I come of the bourgeoisie myself—have they ever shown proof of a single quality that gives them the right to be pleased with themselves? No fear! Outside their potatoes they understand nothing, and what

they don't understand they dread and despise—there are millions of that breed. *Voilà la Société !* The sole quality these people have shown proof of possessing is cowardice. I was educated by the Jesuits,' he concluded ; 'it's given me a habit of thinking.'

Under ordinary circumstances, perhaps, Shelton would have murmured in a well-bred way : 'Ah ! quite so,' and taken refuge behind the columns of the *Daily Telegraph*. In place of this, for some reason that he himself did not understand, he looked at the young foreigner, and asked :

'Why do you say all this to me ?'

The tramp—for by his boots he could hardly have been better—hesitated.

'When you've travelled like me,' he said apologetically, as if resolved to speak the truth, 'you acquire an instinct in choosing to whom and how you may speak. Necessity makes the law ; if you want to live you must learn all that sort of thing to make face against life.'

Shelton, who himself possessed a certain subtlety, could not choose but observe the delicate compliment implied in these words. It was like saying : 'I'm not afraid of *you* misunderstanding me, and thinking me a rascal just because I confess to a professional study of human nature.'

'Is there nothing to be done for that poor girl ?' he asked, reverting with good practical sense to the subject that had started their conversation.

His new acquaintance shrugged his shoulders.

'A broken jug,' said he ; 'you can't mend her. She's going to a cousin in London to see if she can get help ; you've given her the means of getting there—it's all you can do. One knows very well what 'll become of her.'

Shelton looked grave.

'Oh!' he said warmly, 'that's horrible! Couldn't she be induced to go back to her family? I should be glad to—'

The foreigner shook his head.

'*Mon cher monsieur*,' he said bitterly, 'you evidently have not yet had occasion to know what the "family" is like. "The family" does not like damaged goods; it will have nothing to say to sons whose hands have been in the till or unmarriageable daughters. What the devil would they do with her? Better to put a stone round her neck and drown her at once. All the world is Christian, but Christian and good Samaritan are not quite the same thing.'

Shelton looked at the girl, who had remained motionless, with her hands crossed on her bag, and a burning sense of the unfairness of life rose within him.

'Yes,' said the young foreigner, as if reading these thoughts, 'what's called virtue is pretty nearly all luck, isn't it?' and the eyes which he rolled round the carriage expressed some such comment as this: 'Conventions? Ah! have them—have them by all means—but don't look like peacocks because you preserve them; it's all cowardice and luck, my friends—all cowardice and luck!'

'Look here,' said Shelton, 'I'll give her my address, and if she wants to go back to her family she can write to me.'

'She'll never go back; she won't have the courage.'

Shelton caught the cringing, inquisitive glance of the girl's eyes; in the pathetic droop of her lip there was something sensuous, and the conviction that the young man's words were true stole on him.

He hurriedly tore a leaf out of his pocket-book.

'I had better not give them my private address,' he thought, glancing again at the faces opposite; and he wrote down the following: 'Richard Paramor Shelton, c/o Paramor and Herring, 198, Lincoln's Inn Fields.'

'You're very good, sir. My name is Louis Ferrand; no address at present. I'll make her understand; she's half stupefied just now.'

Shelton returned to the perusal of his paper, too disturbed to read; the young foreigner's words kept recurring to him. He raised his eyes. The plump hand of the Roman-faced lady still rested upon her thigh, but it had been recased in a black glove with large white stitching. A frown contracted her brow, her gaze was fixed upon him suspiciously, as if in some way he had outraged the proprieties.

'He didn't get anything out of me,' said the voice of the red-faced man, emerging triumphantly from the ruck of a conversation on tax-gatherers. The train whistled loudly, and Shelton glued his eyes once more to his paper. This time he crossed his legs, firmly determined to enjoy the account of a murder; but once again he found himself looking up at the long-nosed, mocking face opposite. 'That fellow,' he thought, 'has seen and felt ten times more than I, though he must be ten years younger.'

He turned for distraction to the landscape, jumbling up the April clouds, the trim hedgerows and homely coverts with all sorts of strange ideas. He was discontented with himself; the conversation he had just had, the whole personality of the young foreigner, had a curious effect on him. It was as though he had made a start in some fresh journey through the fields of thought.

CHAPTER II

ANTONIA

FIVE years before the journey just described Shelton had stood one afternoon on the barge of his old college towards the end of the ‘eights.’ He had been ‘down’ from Oxford for some years, but the May races rarely failed to attract him.

The boats were passing, and in the usual rush to the side of the barge his arm came into contact with a soft young shoulder. He saw close to him a strip of a girl with fair hair knotted in a ribbon, whose face was eager with excitement. The pointed chin and long neck, the fluffy hair on the forehead, the quick gestures, the calm strenuousness of the gray-blue eyes, made a vivid impression on him.

‘Oh, we *must* bump them!’ he heard her sigh.

‘Do you know my people, Shelton?’ said a voice at his elbow; and he received in his palm a touch from the girl’s shy, impatient hand; the warmer fingers of a lady with round, practical, benevolent eyes like a hare’s; the dry, aristocratic grip of a gentleman with a thin, slightly arched nose, and a quizzical, pale-brown face.

‘Are you the Mr. Shelton who used to play the “bones” at Eton?’ said the lady. ‘Oh, we so often

heard of you from Bernard! He was your fag, wasn't he? How distressin' it is to see these poor boys in the boats!'

'Mother, they like it!' cried the girl.

'Antonia ought to be rowing herself,' said her father, Mr. Dennant.

Shelton returned with them to the Bishop's Head, walking beside Antonia through the Christchurch meadows, and awkwardly telling her uninteresting details of 'Varsity life. He dined with them that evening, and, when he left, had a feeling in his heart comparable to the stimulus from a first glass of champagne.

The Dennants lived at Holm Oaks, within six miles of Oxford, and he drove over two days later to call upon them. Amidst the avocations of reading for the Bar, of cricket, racing, and shooting, it only required a whiff of some fresh scent—hay, honeysuckle, clover—to bring before him the face of that girl with its uncertain colour and its frank, distant eyes. But it was two years before he saw her again. Then, at an invitation from Bernard Dennant, he played cricket for the Manor of Holm Oaks against a neighbouring household, and in the evening danced on the lawn. The fair hair was now turned up in an ashy-gold 'bob,' but the eyes were unchanged. Their steps went together, and they outlasted every other couple on the slippery grass. Thence, perhaps, sprang her respect for him; he was wiry, a little taller than herself, and seemed to try and talk about things that interested her. He found out that she was seventeen, and told her that he himself was twenty-nine. The following two years Shelton was at Holm Oaks as often as he was invited; they were to him two years of vaguely enchanted games,

of cub-hunting, theatricals, and distant sounds of practised music, during which Antonia's eyes became more and more friendly, more and more curious, and his own more and more shy, and schooled, and furtive, and ardent. Then came his father's death, a voyage round the world, and that peculiar hour of mixed sensations when, one March morning, he stepped off the boat at Marseilles and took the train for Hyères.

He found her at one of those exclusive establishments amongst the pines where the best English resort, in common with Americans, Russian princesses, and Jewish families ; he would not have been shocked to find her elsewhere, but he would have been surprised. His sunburnt face and the new beard apologetically displayed, yet on which he set some undefined value, were scanned by those gray-blue eyes with rapid glances, at once more and less friendly. ‘Ah !’ they seemed to say, ‘here you are ; how glad I am ! But—what now ?’

He was admitted to their sacred table at the table-d’hôte, a small oblong of snowy cloth in an airy alcove, where the Honourable Mrs. Dennant, Miss Dennant, and the Honourable Charlotte Penguin, a maiden aunt with weak lungs, sat twice a day in an atmosphere of their own. A momentary uneasiness came upon Shelton the first time he saw them sitting there at lunch. What was it that gave them their look of complete detachment ? Certainly nothing affected or pretentious. Mrs. Dennant was bending over a camera.

‘I’m afraid, d’you know, it’s under-exposed,’ she was saying.

‘What a pity ! The kitten was *rather* nice !’ and the maiden aunt, placing the knitting of a red silk tie

beside her plate, turned her eyes, with their hungry, aspiring, and wholly well-bred gaze, on Shelton.

'Look, Auntie,' said Antonia suddenly in her clear, quick voice, 'there's the funny little man again!'

'Oh,' said the maiden aunt—a smile revealed her upper teeth, and she negligently looked for the funny little man (a Frenchman)—'he's *rather* nice!'

Shelton did not look for the funny little man; he stole a glance that barely reached Antonia's brow, where the eyebrows took a slight upward slant at the outer corners, and the hair was still ruffled by her walk in the wind. From that moment he became her slave.

'Mr. Shelton, do you know anything about these periscopic binoculars?' said the voice of Mrs. Dennant; 'they're splendid for buildin's, but buildin's are so disappointin'. The thing is to get human interest, don't you know?' and her glance wandered absent-mindedly past Shelton as if in search of human interest.

'Have you put down what you've taken this morning, Mother?'

Mrs. Dennant took from a little leather bag a little green leather book.

'It's so easy to forget what they're about, don't you know,' she said, 'and that's so annoyin'.'

Shelton was not again visited by the sense of uneasiness at their detachment; he accepted them and all their works, for there was something sublime about the way they would leave the dining-room, magnificently unconscious that they themselves were funny to those people whom they had negligently found funny during the meal. And he would follow them out unnecessarily upright and feeling like a fool.

In the ensuing fortnight, chaperoned by the maiden aunt, for Mrs. Dennant disliked driving, he sat on the back seat opposite to Antonia throughout a great number of drives; he played many sets of tennis with her; but it was in the evenings after dinner—those long evenings on a parquet floor in wicker chairs dragged as far as possible from the heating apparatus—that he seemed especially near her. The community of isolation drew them closer. In place of a friendly companion he suddenly assumed the proportions of a living, breathing, necessary being, to whom she could confide her home-sickness and her aspirations. So that, even when she sat silent, a slim, long foot stretched out in front, bending with an air of cool absorption over one of those pencil sketches which she would not show him—even then, by her very attitude, by the sweet freshness that clung about her, by her quick, offended glances at the strange persons around, she seemed to acknowledge in some secret way that he was essential. He was far from realizing anything of the sort; his intellectual and observant parts had been hypnotized, fascinated, even by her defects. The slight freckling on the bridge of her nose, the slim, virginal severity of her figure with its narrow hips and angular elbows, the curve of her long neck—all were added charms. She had the wind and rain look, a foretaste of home after his travelling; and over the glaring roads, where the palm-tree shadows lay black and thick enough to be gathered, she seemed to pass like an English day.

One afternoon he had taken her to play tennis with some friends at another hotel, and afterwards they strolled on to look at her favourite view. Down the

Toulon road gardens and hills were bathed in a mist of apricot light ; evening crispness had stolen into the air, and the blood, released from the sun's numbing, ran gladly in the veins. On the right hand of the road a grotesquely fat Frenchman was playing bowls. Enormous, unwieldy, busy, pleased, and upright as a soldier, he delighted Shelton, who found pathos in the way he nimbly trotted his vast carcass from end to end of the ground. Antonia threw a single look at the huge creature, and her face expressed a faint disgust. Turning to the left, she began running up towards the ruined tower.

Shelton let her keep in front, watching her leap from stone to stone and throw back defiant glances when he pressed behind. She stood at the top with her hand to her eyes, and he looked up at her. Over the world, gloriously spread below, she, like a statue, seemed to rule. The colour was brilliant in her cheeks, her young bosom heaved, her eyes shone, and the flowing droop of her long, full sleeves gave to her poised figure the look of one flying. He pulled himself up and stood beside her ; his heart choked him, and all the colour had left his cheeks.

'Antonia,' he said gently, 'I love you.'

She started as if his steadfast whisper had been an intrusion upon a sacred thought ; but his face must have had an expression of hunger, for the resentment in her eyes vanished.

They stood for several minutes without speaking, and then went home. Shelton's mind remained blank, painfully revolving the riddle of the fixed colour in her face. Had he a chance, then ? Was it possible ? That evening the instinct vouchsafed at times to lovers

in place of reason caused him to pack his bag and go to Cannes. On returning, two days later, and approaching the group in the centre of the Winter Garden, the voice of the maiden aunt reading aloud an extract from the *Morning Post* reached him half-way across the room.

‘Don’t you think that’s *rather* nice?’ he heard her ask as he came up.

‘Oh, here you are!’ said Mrs. Dennant; ‘we were wonderin’ when you were comin’ back.’

Shelton slipped into a wicker chair next to Antonia, who looked up quickly from her sketch-book, put out a hand, and said nothing.

He watched her bent head, and his eagerness changed to gloom. With desperate vivacity he sustained five intolerable minutes of commonplaces; then once again the maiden aunt commenced her extracts from the *Morning Post*.

A touch on his sleeve startled him. Antonia was leaning forward, her cheeks crimson above the pallor of her neck.

‘Would you like to see my sketches?’ she asked him.

To Shelton, bending fatuously over the sketches, that carefully well-bred drawl of the maiden aunt intoning the carefully well-bred paper became the pleasantest sound he had ever listened to. . . .

* * * * *

‘My dear Dick,’ Mrs. Dennant said to him a fortnight later, ‘we would rather, after you leave here, that you don’t see each other again till July. Of course I know you count it an engagement and all that, and everybody’s been writin’ to congratulate you. But Algie thinks you ought to give yourselves a chance. Young people don’t

always know what they're doin', you know; it's not long to wait.'

'Three months!' gasped Shelton.

He had to swallow this kindly but practical pill with the best grace at his command. What else was left for him? Antonia had acquiesced in the condition with what seemed like grave pleasure, as if she expected to derive benefit.

'It'll be something to look forward to, Dick,' she said.

He postponed his departure as long as he decently could, and it was not until the end of April that he left for England. She came alone to see him off at the station. It was drizzling, but her tall, slight figure in the golf cape looked wonderfully impervious to cold and rain amongst all the shivering natives. Desperately he clutched at her hand, which was warm through the wet glove; her smile seemed heartless in its brilliancy. He whispered an agonized 'You *will* write?'

'Of course; don't be so stupid, you old Dick!'

She ran forward a step or two as the train began to move; her clear 'Good-bye!' sounded shrill and hard above the rumble of the wheels. He saw her raise her hand, the waving of an umbrella, and last of all, vivid still amongst vanishing shapes, the red splash of her scarlet tam-o'-shanter.

CHAPTER III

A ZOOLOGICAL GARDEN

AFTER his journey from Dover, Shelton was still collecting his luggage at Charing Cross Station, when the unfortunate girl passed him, and in spite of his earnest desire to say something cheering, he could get nothing out but a shamefaced smile. Her figure vanished waveringly into the hurly-burly; one of his bags had gone wrong, so all thought of her soon faded from his mind. His cab, however, overtook the young foreigner marching along towards Pall Mall with a curious, lengthy stride—an observant and disillusioned figure.

The first bustle of installation over, time hung heavily on his hands. July loomed distant, as it were, in some future century, and Antonia's eyes seemed to beckon him faintly, hopelessly. She would not even be returning to England for another month.

' . . . I met a young foreigner coming up in the train from Dover' (he wrote to her)—' a curious sort of person altogether, who seems to have infected me. Everything here has gone flat and unprofitable; the only good things in life are your letters. . . . John Noble dined with me yesterday; the poor fellow tried to persuade me to stand for Parliament. Why on earth should I think myself fit to legislate for the unhappy wretches one

sees about in the streets? If people's faces are a fair test of their happiness, I'd rather not feel in any way responsible. . . .'

The streets, in fact, after his long absence, afforded him much food for reflection—the curious gray smugness of the passers-by; the utterly unending bustle; the fearful medley of miserable, overworked women and full-fed men, with leering, bull-beef eyes, whom he saw everywhere in club windows, on their beats, on box seats, on the steps of hotels, gossiping or discharging dilatory duties; the appalling chaos of hard-eyed, capable dames with defiant clothes, and white-cheeked, hunted-looking men; of splendid creatures in cabs, and cadging creatures in broken hats—the callous monotony.

One afternoon in May he received the following letter in the French language:

' MY DEAR SIR,

' 3, BLANK Row,

' WESTMINSTER.

' Excuse me for recalling to your memory the offer of assistance you so kindly made me during the journey from Dover to London, in which I was so fortunate as to travel with a man like you. Having beaten the whole town, ignorant of what wood to make arrows, nearly at the end of my resources, my spirit profoundly discouraged, I venture to avail myself of your permission, knowing that you are a good heart. Since I saw you I have run through all the misfortunes of the calendar, and know not what door is left at which I have not knocked. I presented myself at the business firm with whose name you supplied me, but being unfortunately in rags, they refused to give me your private address. Is not this very much in the

English character? They told me to write, and said they would forward the letter. I put all my hopes in you.

‘ Believe me, my dear sir
‘ (whatever you may decide),
‘ Your very devoted
‘ LOUIS FERRAND.’

Shelton looked at the envelope, and saw that it bore a date more than a week old. The face of the young foreigner floated before him, vital, sensitive, mocking; the sound of his quick French buzzed in his ears, and oddly, the whole whiff of him had a searching power of raising more vividly than ever his memories of Antonia. It had been at the end of his journey from Hyères to London that he had met him, and it gave the fellow a certain claim—a certain queer, sensuous claim.

He took his hat and hurried to Blank Row. Dismissing his cab at the corner of Victoria Street, with some difficulty he found the house in question. It was one of those doorless zoological gardens, with stone-flagged corridors, known as doss-houses. By tapping on a sort of cage with a sliding window like a ticket-office, he at last attracted the attention of a blowsy woman with soap-suds on her arms, who informed him that the party in question had gone away without leaving any address.

‘ But isn’t there anybody,’ asked Shelton, ‘ of whom I can make inquiry?’

‘ Yes; there’s a Frenchman.’ And opening the door of an inner room she bellowed: ‘ Carolan! Wanted!’ and disappeared.

A dried-up, yellow little man, with one of those

wearily cynical faces that look as if a moral steam-roller had passed over them, answered the call, and stood, as it were, sniffing at Shelton, upon whom he made the singular impression of a creature struggling to get out of a pit.

'He left here ten days ago, in the company of a mulatto. What do you want with him, if I may ask?' said the little man, his yellow cheeks wrinkling with suspicion.

Shelton produced the letter.

'Oh, I know you now'—a pale smile broke through the Frenchman's crow's-feet—"he spoke of you. "If I can only find him," he used to say, "I am saved." I liked that young man; he had ideas.'

'Is there no way of getting at him through his Consul?' asked Shelton.

The Frenchman shook his head.

'You may as well look for a diamond at the bottom of the sea.'

'Do you think he might come back here? By that time I suppose you'll hardly be here yourself?'

A gleam of amusement played about the Frenchman's teeth:

'I? Oh yes, sir! Once upon a time I cherished the hope of emerging; I no longer have such illusions. I shave these specimens for a living, and shall shave them till the day of judgment. But leave a letter with me by all means; I think he'll come back. There's an overcoat of his here on which he borrowed money—it's valuable. Oh yes; he'll come back—a youth of principle. Leave a letter with me; I'm always here.'

In some vague part of him Shelton had a sensation of being exploited and even of causing amusement, but

these last three words, ‘I’m always here,’ in their categorical simplicity touched him. Nothing more dreadful could have been said.

‘Can you find me a sheet of paper?’ he asked ; ‘and please keep the change for the trouble I’m giving you.’

‘Thank you,’ said the Frenchman simply ; ‘he told me you had a good heart. If you don’t mind the kitchen, you could write at your ease.’

Shelton wrote his letter at the table of the stone-flagged kitchen in the company of an old gentleman dried to the consistency of a mummy by drink and the wind, who was muttering to himself; and Shelton tried to avoid attracting his attention, for he shrewdly suspected that he was not sober. Just as he was about to take his leave the old fellow accosted him :

‘Did you ever go to the dentist, mister?’ he said, working a loose tooth between his shrivelled lips, and, without waiting for an answer, went on : ‘I been to a dentist once, who professed to stop teeth without any pain, and the beggar did stop my teeth without any pain ; but did they stay in, those stoppings ? No, my boy ; they came out before you could say Jack Robinson. Now, I shimplly ask you, d’you call that dentistry ?’ Fixing his eyes on Shelton’s collar, which had the misfortune to be both high and clean, he resumed, with drunken scorn : ‘It’s the same all over this pharisaical country. Talk of high morality and Anglo-Shaxon civilization ! The world was never at such a low ebb ! What’s all this morality ? It shtinks of the shop. Look at the condition of Art in this country ! look at these blanks you see on th’ stage ! look at the pictures and books that sell ! I know what I’m talking about, though I *am* a sandwich man. What’s the secret of it

all? Shop, my boy! It don't pay to go below a certain depth! Scratch the skin, but pierce it—oh! dear, no! We hate to see the blood fly, eh?"

Shelton stood disconcerted, not knowing if he were expected to answer this question; but the old gentleman, pursing his lips, went on:

'Sir, there are no extremes in this fog-smitten land. D'you think blanks like me ought to exist? Why don't they kill us off? Palliatives—palliatives'—he worried the word like a dog with a piece of rag—'and why? Because they object to th' extreme course. And look at the women: the streets here are a scandal to the rest of the world. They won't recognise that they exist—their noses are so high, dam 'em! They blink the truth in this middle-class country. My boy'—and he seemed to take Shelton into his confidence—'it pays 'em. Eh? you say; why shouldn't they, then?' (Shelton had not opened his lips). 'Well, let 'em! oh, let 'em! But don't tell me that'sh morality'—and he drummed his shrunken fist on the table—'don't tell me that'sh civilization! What can you expect in a country where the crimson emotions are never allowed to smell the air? And what'sh the result? My boy, the result is sentiment, a yellow thing with blue spots, like a fungus or a Stilton cheese. Go to the theatre, and see one of these things they call plays. Tell me they're food for men and women! Why, they're pap for babes and shop-boys! I was a blanky actor myself!'

Shelton listened to this lecture with mingled feelings of amusement and dismay, till the old actor, having finished, resumed his crouching posture at the table.

'You don't get drunk, I suppose?' he remarked suddenly—'too much of 'n Englishman, no doubt.'

'Very seldom,' said Shelton.

'Pity! Think of the pleasures of oblivion! *I'm* drunk every night.'

'How long will you last at that rate?'

'There speaks the Englishman! Why should I give up my only pleasure to keep my wretched life in? If you've anything left worth the keeping sober for, keep sober by all means; if not, the sooner you're drunk the better—that stands to reason.'

In the corridor Shelton asked the Frenchman whether the old fellow could possibly be English.

'Englishman! Yes, yes, certainly, from Belfast—very drunken old man. You are a drunken nation,'—he made an expressive motion with his hands—'he no longer eats—no inside left. It's unfortunate—a man of spirit. If you have never seen one of these palaces, monsieur, I shall be happy to show you over it.'

Shelton took out his cigarette case.

'Yes, yes,' said the Frenchman, making a wry nose and taking a proffered cigarette; 'I'm accustomed to it. But you're wise to fumigate the air; one isn't in a harem.'

Shelton felt ashamed of his fastidiousness.

'This,' said the guide, leading him upstairs and opening a door, 'is a specimen of the apartments reserved for these princes of the blood.' There were four empty beds on iron legs, and, with the air of a showman, the Frenchman lifted the dingy quilt. 'They go out in the mornings, earn enough to make them drunk, sleep it off, and begin again. That's their life. There are people who think they ought to be reformed. *Mon cher monsieur*, one must face reality a little, even in this country. It would be a hundred times better for

these people to spend their time reforming high Society. Your high Society makes all these creatures ; there's no harvest without cutting stalks. *Selon moi*, ' he continued, throwing back the quilt, and dribbling cigarette smoke through his nose, ' there's no grand difference between your high Society and these individuals ; both want pleasure, both think only of themselves, which is very natural. One lot have had luck, the other—well, you see.' He shrugged. ' A common set ! I've been robbed here half a dozen times. If you have new shoes, a good waistcoat, an overcoat, you want eyes in the back of your head. And they are populated ! Change your bed, and you'll run all the dangers of not sleeping alone. *V'là ma clientèle !* The half of them don't pay me ! ' He snapped his yellow sticks of fingers. ' A penny for a shave, twopence for a cut ! *Quelle vie !* Here,' he continued, standing by one of the beds, ' is a gentleman with a face like a diseased potato who owes me fivepence. Here's one who was a soldier ; he's done for ! All brutalized ; not one with any courage left ! But, believe me, monsieur,' he went on, opening the door of another room, ' when you come down to houses like this you *must* have a vice ; it's as necessary as breath to the lungs. No matter what, you must have a vice to give you a little solace—*un peu de soulagement*. Ah, yes ! before condemning these swine reflect a little on life. I've been through it. Believe me, monsieur, it's not nice never to know where to get your next meal. Gentlemen who have food in their stomachs, money in their pockets, and know where to get more, they never reflect. Why should they—*pas de danger !* All these cages are the same. Come down, and I'll show you the pantry.' He took Shelton a second time through the kitchen,

which seemed to be the only sitting-room of the establishment, and showed him an inner room furnished with disgustingly dirty cups, saucers, and plates. Another fire was burning there. ‘We always have hot water,’ said the Frenchman, ‘and three times a week they make a fire down there’—he pointed to a cellar—‘for our clients to boil their vermin. Oh yes, we have all the luxuries.’

Shelton returned to the kitchen, and directly after took leave of the little Frenchman, who said, with a kind of moral button-holing, as if trying to adopt him as a patron :

‘Trust me, monsieur; if he comes back—that young man—he shall have your letter without fail.’

CHAPTER IV

THE PLAY

SHELTON walked pensively away ; he felt as if he had been indulging in a nightmare. ‘That old actor was drunk,’ thought he, ‘and I suppose he was an Irishman ; still, there may be something in what he said. No doubt I’m a Pharisee, like all the rest who aren’t in the pit. My respectability is only luck. What should I have become if I’d been born into his kind of life ?’ and he stared at the stream of people coming out of the Army and Navy Stores, trying to pierce the mask of their serious, complacent faces. If these ladies and gentlemen were put into the pit into which he had just been looking, would a single one of them ever again emerge ? Certainly none could ever have imagined themselves in such a position ; it was too remote—too ridiculously remote.

He fixed his eyes on a particular couple, a large, fine man and his wife, who, in the midst of all the dirt and rumble and hurry, the gloom, ludicrousness, and desperate joviality of the streets, walked side by side in a well-bred way, and had evidently bought something which pleased them. There was nothing offensive about their manner ; on the contrary, they seemed quite unconcerned at the passing of other people. The

man had the fine solidity of shoulder and waist, the quiet, glossy self-possession connected with horses, guns, and dressing-bags. The wife, her chin comfortably settled on her fur, kept her gray eyes fixed upon her hands, and, when she spoke, her even, unruffled voice reached Shelton's ears above all the whirring of the traffic. It was leisurely and precise, as if it had never been hurried, never exhausted, never passionate, and never afraid. Their conversation, like that of many dozens of fine couples who invade London from their country places, was of where they should dine, what theatre they should go to, whom they had seen, and what they should buy. And Shelton had a sudden conviction that from day's end to day's end, and even in their bed, these would be the subjects of their conversation. They were the best-bred people of the sort he had constantly met in country houses and accepted as a matter of course, with a vague discomfort at the bottom of his soul. Antonia's home, for instance, had been full of them. They were the best-bred people of the sort who supported good works, knew everybody, had clear, calm judgment, and an intolerance of all conduct that seemed to them 'impossible,' all breaches of morality, such as errors of etiquette, dishonesty, passion and sympathy (except with a canonized class of objects—the *legitimate* sufferings, for instance, of their own families and class). How healthy they were! The memory of the doss-house was working in Shelton's mind like a poison. He was subconscious that in his own well-groomed figure, in the undemonstrative assurance of his own walk, he bore a resemblance to the couple he was apostrophizing. 'Ah!' he thought violently, 'how vulgar our refinement is!' But he

hardly believed his own outburst. These people were *so* well mannered, *so* well conducted, *so* healthy, he could not really understand what gave him the feeling of irritation. What was the matter with them? They fulfilled their duties, had good appetites, clear consciences, all the furniture of exemplary citizens; they merely lacked—feelers, a loss that, he had read, was suffered by plants and animals which no longer had a necessity for employing them. Some rare national faculty, perhaps, of seeing only the obvious and materially advantageous had destroyed their capacity for catching stray gleams or scents to right or left.

The lady looked up at her husband. The light of quiet, proprietary affection shone in her calm, gray eyes, decorously illuminating the full statuesque features, slightly reddened by the wind. The husband looked down at his wife, calm, practical, protecting. They were singularly alike. So doubtless he looked when he presented himself in snowy shirt-sleeves for her to straighten the bow of his white tie; so nightly she would look, standing before the full-length mirror, and fixing on her bosom his gifts. Calm, proprietary, kind! He passed them and walked behind a second and less distinguished couple, who manifested a mutual dislike as matter-of-fact and free from nonsense as the unruffled satisfaction of the first; this dislike was just as healthy, and produced in Shelton about the same sensation. It was like knocking at an unopenable door, looking at a circle—couple after couple all the same. No heads, toes, angles of their souls stuck out anywhere. In the sea of their environments they were drowned; no leg braved the air, no arm emerged wet and naked to wave at the skies; shop-persons, aristocrats, workmen,

officials, they were all respectable. And he himself as respectable as any of them.

He returned moodily to his rooms, and, with the impetuosity which distinguished him when about to do an unwise thing, seized his pen and poured out before Antonia some of his impressions :

' . . . Mean is the word, darling ; we are mean, that's what's the matter with us, dukes and dustmen, the whole human species—as mean as caterpillars. To secure our own property and our own comfort, to dole out our sympathy according to rule just so that it won't really hurt us, is what we're all after. There's something about human nature that is awfully repulsive, and the healthier people are, the more repulsive they seem to be. . . . '

He paused, biting the end of his untidy pen ; his pens were by turns hopelessly untidy, or so severely tidy that it was quite a pleasure to use them. Had he a single acquaintance who would not have advised him to see a doctor for writing such rubbish ? How would the world go round, or Society exist, without common-sense, practical ability, and the absence of sympathy ?

He looked out of the long French window. Down in the street a footman was settling the rug over the knees of a lady in a carriage, and the decorous immovability of both their faces, which were clearly visible to him even on the first floor, was like a portion of some well-oiled rigid machine. He got up and began to walk up and down. His rooms, in one of those narrow squares skirting Belgravia, were the same he had inhabited before the death of his father had made him a man of property. Selected for their centrality, they were

full of things from his diggings at Oxford, from his chambers in the Temple, from his room in his father's house. They were certainly not bare, but a close inspection revealed an underlying asceticism ; everything was damaged, more or less, and there was absolutely nothing that seemed to have any interest taken in it. The things looked like accidents, presents, or the haphazard acquisitions of a pressing necessity. Nothing, of course, was frowsy, but everything was more or less dusty, as if belonging to a man who never had a row with a servant. Above all, there was nothing that indicated a hobby. Through these rooms he walked up and down, smoked a pipe, and looked at Antonia's photograph.

Three days later he had her answer to his letter :

' . . . I don't ' (she wrote) ' think I understand what you mean by "the healthier people are, the more repulsive they seem to be"; one must be healthy to be perfect, mustn't one ? I don't like unhealthy people. I had to play Bach on that wretched piano after reading your letter ; it made me feel so unhappy. I've been having a splendid lot of tennis lately, and I've got the back-handed lifting stroke at last—hurrah ! . . . '

By the same post, too, came the following note, in an authoritative handwriting :

' DEAR BIRD (Shelton's nickname),

' My wife has gone down to her people, so I'm *en garçon* for a few days. If you've nothing better to do, come and dine to-night at seven, and go to the theatre. It's ages since I saw you.

' Yours ever,

' B. M. HALIDOME.'

Shelton had nothing better to do, for pleasant was his remembrance of Halidome's well-appointed dinners. At seven o'clock, therefore, he presented himself in Chester Square, where he found his friend in his study, reading Arnold by the light of an electric lamp with a green shade. The walls of the room were hung with costly etchings, arranged with solid and scrupulous taste ; from the carving of the mantelpiece to the binding of the book he was reading, from the miraculously-coloured meerschaums on the side-table to the chased fireirons, everything displayed a luxury and lack of pretence, an order and finish significant of a life completely under control. Everything had been collected. The collector rose as Shelton entered, a fine figure of a man, clean shaven, with dark hair, a Roman nose, good eyes, and the slightly ponderous dignity of attitude (he had no gestures) which comes from the assurance that one is in the right.

'Glad to see you, old chap,' he said ; and taking Shelton by the lapel, he drew him into the radius of the lamp, where he examined him slowly, smiling a critical smile. 'I rather like your beard,' he said with genial brusqueness ; and nothing, perhaps, could better have summed up his faculty for forming an independent judgment that Shelton had always found so admirable. He did not apologize for the dinner, which, consisting of eight courses and three wines, served by a butler and only one footman, smacked of the same perfection as the furniture ; in fact, he had never been known to apologize for anything, except with a brusque joviality that was a little worse than the offence. The suave and reasonable weight of his approvals and disapprovals stirred Shelton up, as usual, to feel both ironical and

insignificant ; but whether from a sense of the truly solid, humane, and healthy quality of Halidome's egoism, or merely from the fact that their friendship had been long in bottle, he had never resented the mixed sensations which his friend's society provoked.

'By the way, I congratulate you, old chap,' said the latter, as they were driving to the theatre ; there was no vulgar hurry about his congratulations, no more than about any other part of him. 'They're awfully nice people, the Dennants.'

An indefinite sense of having had the seal of eclecticism put on his engagement invaded Shelton.

'Where are you going to live ? You ought to come down and live near us in the country ; there are some ripping houses to be had down there ; it's really a ripping neighbourhood. Have you chucked the Bar ? You ought to *do* something, you know ; it'll be fatal for you to have nothing to do. I tell you what, Bird : you ought to stand for the County Council.'

But before Shelton could reply they reached the theatre, and had to devote their energies to sidling into their stalls. He had time to examine his neighbours before the play began. Seated next him was a lady with large healthy shoulders, displayed with splendid liberality ; beyond her a husband, red cheeked, with drooping, yellow-gray moustache and a very bald head ; beyond him again two men he had known at Eton. One of them had a clean-shaved face, smooth, dark hair, and a weathered complexion ; his small mouth with its upper lip in advance of the lower, his eyelids a little drooped over alert eyes, gave him a satirically resolute expression. 'I've got hold of your tail, old fellow,' he seemed to be saying, as if he had spent a lifetime in catching a fox.

The other's large, goggling eyes rested on Shelton with a chaffing smile ; his thick, sleek hair, brushed with water and parted in the middle, his neat moustache and admirable waistcoat, suggested a dandyism contemptuous of women. From his recognition of these two old schoolfellows, Shelton turned back to look at Halidome, who, having sonorously cleared his throat, was staring straight before him at the curtain. Antonia's words kept running in her lover's head : 'I don't like unhealthy people.' Well, none of *these* people, anyway, were unhealthy ; on the contrary, they looked as if they had formally defied the elements to endow them with spirituality ; but at that moment the curtain went up.

Slowly and unwillingly, for he was of a trustful disposition, Shelton recognised that this play was one of those masterpieces of modern drama where the characters were all drawn on the principle that men have been made for morality rather than morality made by men, and he watched the action unfold itself with a careful sandwiching of grave and gay.

A married woman anxious to be free of her marriage tie was the pivot of the story, and a number of ingeniously contrived situations, with a hundred reasons why this desire was both wrong and inexpedient, were presented to Shelton. These reasons issued for the most part from the mouth of one of the characters, a well-preserved old gentleman with a moustache and a reputation as a 'man of the world,' who seemed to Shelton to play the part of a sort of Moral Assessor. He could not help leaning over to Halidome and whispering :

'Can you stand that old woman ?'

His friend turned his fine eyes upon him wonderingly.

'What old woman ?' he asked.

'Why, the old ass with the platitudes!' returned Shelton, surprised.

Halidome's countenance (he was one of those men whose faces are best described by the word 'countenance') grew cold and a little shocked, as though in some way he had been personally insulted.

'Do you mean Pirbright?' he said. 'I think he's ripping.'

Shelton turned back to the play rebuffed; he felt guilty of a breach of good manners, sitting as he was in one of Halidome's stalls, and he naturally set to work to watch the play more critically than ever. Antonia's words again recurred to him: 'I don't like unhealthy people,' and they seemed to throw a sudden light upon this play. It was healthy!

He was now watching the crisis.

The scene represented a drawing-room, softly lighted by electric lamps, with a cat (Shelton could not decide whether she was real or not) asleep on the mat.

The husband, a thick-set, healthy man in evening dress, was drinking neat whisky. He put down his tumbler, and deliberately struck a match; then with even greater deliberation he lit a gold-tipped cigarette. . . .

Shelton was no inexperienced play-goer. He shifted his elbows on the arms of his stall, for he felt that something was about to happen; and when the match described a parabola into the fire, he leaned forward in his seat.

The husband poured out more whisky, tossed it off at a draught, and walked to the door; then, turning towards the audience as if to let them into the confidence of some momentous decision, he puffed at them a puff of smoke. He went out, returned, and once more filled his glass.

A lady now entered, pale of face and dark of eye—his wife. The husband crossed to the fireplace, and stood there with his legs astride, in the attitude which somehow Shelton had felt sure he would assume. His voice fell on Shelton's ear with a composed twang :

‘Come in, please, and shut the door.’

Shelton suddenly perceived that he was face to face with one of those dumb moments in which two people declare their inextinguishable hatred—the hatred underlying the sexual intimacy of two utterly different creatures, and he was suddenly reminded of a scene he had once witnessed in a restaurant. He remembered with extreme minuteness how the woman and the man had sat facing each other across the narrow patch of white cloth, emblazoned by an electric candle with a cheap shade and a thin, blue-green vase with red flowers. He remembered the curious scornful offensiveness of their voices, subdued so that only a word here and there reached him. He remembered the cold loathing in their eyes. And, above all, he remembered his impression that this sort of scene happened between them every other day, and would continue to happen; and as he put on his overcoat and paid his bill, he had asked himself, ‘Why in the name of decency do they go on living together?’ And he suddenly thought to himself, as he listened to the two players wrangling on the stage : ‘What’s the good of all this talk? There’s something here past words.’

The curtain came down upon the act, and he looked furtively at the lady next him. She was shrugging her shoulders at her husband, whose face wore an offended expression.

‘I do dislike these unhealthy women,’ he was just

saying, but catching Shelton's eye, he turned square in his seat, with an ironical sniff.

The face of Shelton's friend beyond, composed and satirical as ever, was clothed with a mask of contemptuous curiosity, as if he had been listening to something both startling and a little impertinent. The goggle-eyed man was yawning. Shelton turned to Halidome :

'Can you stand this sort of thing?' said he.

'No; I call that scene a bit too hot,' replied his friend.

Shelton wriggled; he had meant to say it was not hot enough.

'I will bet you anything,' he said, 'I know what's going to happen now. You'll have that old ass—what's his name?—lunching off cutlets and champagne to fortify himself for a lecture to the wife. He'll show her how unhealthy her feelings are—I know him—and he'll take her hand and say, "Dear lady, is there anything in this poor world but the good opinion of Society?"' and he'll pretend to laugh at himself for saying it; but you'll see perfectly well that the old woman means it. And then he'll put her into a set of circumstances that aren't her own but his version of them, and show her the only way of salvation is to kiss her husband;' and Shelton grinned. 'Anyway,' he concluded, 'I'll bet you anything he takes her hand and says, "Dear lady."'

Halidome turned upon him the cold disapproval of his fine eyes, and again he said :

'I think Pirbright's ripping!'

But as Shelton had predicted, so it turned out, amidst great applause.

CHAPTER V

THE GOOD CITIZEN

LEAVING the theatre, they paused a moment in the hall to put on their coats ; a stream of people with spotless bosoms eddied round the doors, as if in momentary dread of leaving the hothouse of their emotions, where all was grown by rule, for the wet, gusty streets, where human plants thrive and die, human weeds flourish and fade under fresh, inscrutable skies. The lights revealed innumerable composed faces, gleamed innumerably on jewels, on the silk of tall hats, then passed to whiten a pavement wet with newly-fallen rain, to flare on the horses, the visages of cab-runners, the stray, queer objects that do not bear the light.

‘ Shall we walk ?’ asked Halidome, linking his arm in his friend’s.

‘ Has it ever struck you,’ said Shelton reflectively, ‘ that in a play nowadays there’s always a “ Chorus of Scandalmongers ” which seems to have acquired the functions of God ?’

Halidome cleared his throat, and there was something portentous in the sound.

‘ You’re so d——d fastidious,’ he said, with amused toleration.

‘ I’ve a prejudice for keeping the two things separate,’

went on Shelton. ‘Anyway, that ending makes me sick.’

‘Why?’ replied Halidome. ‘I don’t see what other end is possible. You don’t want a play to leave you with a bad taste in your mouth.’

‘But this does.’

His friend increased his stride, which was already too long. In his walk, as in every other phase of him, he betrayed the necessity for taking the lead.

‘How d’you mean?’ he asked urbanely; ‘it’s better than the woman making a fool of herself.’

‘I don’t know anything about the woman; I don’t believe there ever was one like that. I’m thinking of the man.’

‘What man?’

‘The husband.’

‘What’s the matter with him? He was a bit of a bounder, certainly.’

‘I can’t understand any man wanting to live with a woman who doesn’t want him.’

Probably some note of battle in Shelton’s voice, rather than the sentiment itself, caused his friend to reply with dignity:

‘There’s a lot of nonsense talked about that sort of thing. Women don’t really care; it’s only what’s put into their heads.’

‘By Jove!’ said Shelton, ‘that’s much the same as saying to a starving man: “You don’t really want anything; it’s only what’s put into your head!” Anyway, you’re begging the question.’

But nothing was more calculated to annoy his friend than to tell him he was ‘begging the question,’ for he prided himself on being strong in logic.

‘ Begging the question be d——d,’ he replied.

‘ Not at all, old chap,’ pleaded Shelton ; ‘ here is a case where a woman really wants to be free, and you merely answer that she *doesn’t* want to be free.’

‘ Women like that are impossible ; better leave them out of court.’

Shelton pondered this a moment and smiled ; he had recollected an acquaintance of his own, who, when his wife left him, invented the theory that she was mad, and this struck him now as funny. The next moment, however, another view of the incident presented itself. ‘ Poor devil !’ he thought ; ‘ he was bound to say she was mad ! If he didn’t, it would be as good as confessing himself thoroughly distasteful to her ; and, however true, you can’t expect a man to consider himself that.’ But he did not say this aloud. A glance at his friend’s autocratic eye warned him that he, too, might think his wife mad if she left him.

‘ But surely,’ he hazarded, ‘ even if she’s his wife, a man’s bound to behave like a gentleman.’

‘ Depends on whether she behaves like a lady.’

‘ Does it ?’ said Shelton ; ‘ I don’t see the connection.’

Halidome paused in the act of turning the latch-key in his door, and looked round at Shelton ; a touch of brutality burned behind the rather angry smile in his fine eyes.

‘ My dear chap,’ he said, ‘ you’re too sentimental altogether.’

‘ Hang it !’ said Shelton, for the word ‘ sentimental ’ nettled him, ‘ a gentleman either *is* a gentleman or he *isn’t* ; what’s it got to do with the way other people behave ?’

Halidome turned the key in the lock and opened the

door into his cosy hall, where the firelight fell on decanters of drink and huge chairs drawn towards the blaze.

'No, Bird,' he said, with a full resumption of autocratic urbanity, and gathering his coat-tails in his hands he gazed down at Shelton's chair; 'it's all very well to talk, but wait till you're married. A man must be master, and show that he's master.'

An idea occurred to Shelton.

'Look here, Hal,' he said: 'what should you do if your wife got tired of you?'

The expression on Halidome's face was a sad mixture of contempt and amusement.

'I don't mean anything personal, of course,' Shelton hastened to explain; 'I mean, just apply the situation to yourself.'

Halidome took out a toothpick, used it brusquely, and replied:

'I shouldn't stand any humbug—take her travelling; shake her mind up. She'd soon come round.'

'But suppose she really loathed you?'

Halidome cleared his throat angrily; the idea was obviously indecent. How could anybody loathe him? With great composure, however, and looking at Shelton as if he were a forward but amusing child, he answered:

'There are a great many things to be taken into consideration!'

'Really!' said Shelton; 'it seems to me a question of common pride. How can you ask anything of a woman who doesn't want to give it?'

His friend's voice became judicial.

'A man ought not to suffer,' he said, poring over his whisky, 'because a woman gets hysteria. You have to think of Society, your children, house, money arrange-

ments, a thousand things. It's all very well to talk. How do you like this whisky ?'

'The part of the good citizen, in fact,' said Shelton, sitting forward, with eager eyes—'self-preservation !'

'Common-sense,' returned his friend ; 'I believe in justice before sentimentalism.' He drank, and, putting his foot on the fender, callously blew smoke down at Shelton. 'Besides, there are any number of people with religious views about it.'

'Ah !' said Shelton, 'it's always struck me that for people to assert that marriage gives them the right to "an eye for an eye" and call themselves Christians is quaint. Did you ever know anybody stand on their rights except out of wounded pride or for the sake of their own comfort ? Let them call their reasons what they like, you know as well as I do it's cant.'

'I don't know about that,' said Halidome, appearing more and more superior as Shelton grew warm ; 'when you stand on your rights, you do it for the sake of Society just as much as for your own. If you want to do away with marriage, why don't you say so ?'

'But I don't,' said Shelton warmly ; 'is it likely ? Why, I'm going——' He stopped without adding the words 'to be married myself,' for it suddenly occurred to him that the reason was not the most lofty and philosophical in the world. 'All I can say is,' he went on more soberly, 'that you can't make a horse drink by driving him. I should have thought generosity was the surest way of tightening the knot with people who've got any sense of decency ; and as to the rest, the chief thing is to prevent their breeding.'

Halidome smiled.

'You're a rum chap,' he said.

Shelton jerked his cigarette into the fire.

'I tell you what'—for sometimes late at night a certain power of vision would come to him—'it's all humbug to talk of doing things for the sake of Society; it's nothing but the instinct to keep our own heads above water.'

Halidome remained unruffled.

'All right,' said he, 'call it that. I don't see why *I* should go to the wall; it wouldn't do any good.'

'I suppose you'd say, then,' said Shelton, whose honesty did not suffer him to blink an idea presented by the other side, 'that morality is the sum total of everybody's private instinct of self-preservation?'

Halidome stretched his splendid frame and yawned comfortably.

'I don't know,' he began, 'that I should quite call it that—'

But at that moment the compelling complacency of his fine eyes, the dignified posture of his healthy body, the lofty slope of his narrow forehead, the perfectly humane look of his cultivated brutality, struck Shelton as supremely ludicrous.

'Hang it all, Hal!' he cried, jumping out of his chair, 'what an old fraud you are! I'll just take another cigarette and be off.'

'No, look here,' said Halidome, the faintest shade of uneasiness appearing in his smile, as he took Shelton by the lapel: 'you're quite wrong—'

'Very likely,' said Shelton; 'good-night, old chap!' and escaped.

He walked home, and let the spring wind into his lungs. It was Saturday night, and he passed many silent couples. In every little patch of shadow he could see two forms standing or sitting close together,

and in their presence Life the Impostor seemed to hold its tongue. The wind rustled the buds ; the stars, one moment bright as diamonds, vanished the next. In the lower streets a large part of the world was under the influence of drink, but Shelton was far from being annoyed. It seemed better than Drama, than dressing-bagged men, unruffled women, and padded points of view, better than the immaculate solidity of his friend's possessions.

'So,' he reflected, 'it's the right thing for every reason, social, religious, and convenient, to inflict one's society where it's not desired. There are obviously advantages about the married state ; it must be charming to feel thoroughly respectable while you're acting in a way that in any other walk of life would bring you into contempt. If old Halidome showed he was tired of me, and I continued to visit him, he'd think me a bit of a cad ; but if his wife were to tell him she couldn't stand him, he'd still consider himself a perfect gentleman if he persisted in giving her the burden of his society ; and he has the cheek to bring religion into it—a religion that says, "Do unto others!"'

But he was unjust to his friend, forgetting for the moment how impossible it would be for him to really believe that his wife couldn't stand him. He reached his rooms, and, the more freely to enjoy the clear lamp-light, the soft, gusty breeze, and waning turmoil of the streets, waited a moment before entering.

'I wonder,' thought he, 'if I shall turn out a cad when I marry, like that chap in the play. It's perfectly natural. We all want our money's worth, our pound of flesh ! Pity we use such fine words—"Society, Religion, Morality." Humbug !'

He went in, and, throwing open his window, remained there a long time, his figure outlined against the lighted room for the benefit of the dark square below, his hands in his pockets, his head down, and a reflective frown about his eyes. A half-intoxicated old ruffian, a policeman, and a man in a straw hat had stopped below, and were holding a palaver.

‘Yus,’ he heard the old ruffian say, ‘I’m a rackety old blank ; but what I say is, if we was all alike, this wouldn’t be a world !’

They passed on, and before Shelton’s eyes rose Antonia’s face, with unruffled brow ; Halidome’s, all health and dignity ; the forehead of the goggle-eyed man, with its line of hair parted in the centre and brushed flat and level across. A light seemed to illumine the plane of their existence, as the electric lamp with the green shade had illuminated the pages of Halidome’s Arnold ; serene before Shelton’s vision lay that Elysium, untouched by passion or extremes of any kind, autocratic, complacent, possessive, well-kept as a Midland landscape. Healthy, wealthy, and wise ! No room for anything but perfection, self-preservation, and the survival of the fittest ! ‘The part of the good citizen,’ he thought : ‘no, if we were all alike, this wouldn’t be a world !’

CHAPTER VI

MARRIAGE SETTLEMENT

'MY DEAR RICHARD' (wrote Shelton's uncle the following day), 'I shall be glad to see you at three o'clock to-morrow afternoon upon the question of your marriage settlement. . . .' At that hour accordingly Shelton made his way to Lincoln's Inn Fields, where in fat black letters the names 'Paramor and Herring (Commissioners for Oaths)' were written upon the doorway of a stone entrance. He ascended the solid steps with the nervousness he always experienced in approaching a place of business, and by a small red-haired boy was introduced to a back-room on the first floor. Here, seated at a table in the very centre, as if he thereby acquired an added control of his universe, a pug-featured gentleman, without a vestige of beard, was writing. He paused as Shelton came in.

'Ow, Mr. Richard!' said he; 'glad to see you, sir. Won't you take a chair? Your uncle will be disengaged in a minute;' and the tone of his allusion to his employer was the restrained, semi-satirical disapproval that comes with long and faithful service. 'He *will* do everything himself,' he grumbled, taking Shelton into his confidence by screwing up his greenish eyes full of sly honesty, 'and,' he added, with the

satisfaction of one who delivers a warning, ‘he’s not a young man.’

Shelton sat down and asked after his health. He never saw his uncle’s head clerk without marvelling at the gradual deepening of prosperity upon his face. In place of the look of harassment which most faces begin to acquire after the age of fifty, his old friend’s countenance, as though in sympathy with the nation, had expanded—a little greasily, a little genially, a little coarsely—every time he met it. A contemptuous tolerance for people who were not getting on was growing deeper and deeper below the surface; it left each time a more satisfactory impression that its owner could never be in the wrong. Shelton had never seen him anywhere else but at that table in the centre of the large room.

‘I hope you’re well, sir,’ he said in turn: ‘most important for you to have your health now you’re going—to’—and, feeling for the delicate way to put it, he quite involuntarily winked—‘to become a family man. We saw it in the paper. My wife said to me the other morning at breakfast: “Bob, here’s a Mr. Richard Paramor Shelton going to be married. Is that any relative to your Mr. Shelton?” “My dear,” I said to her, “it’s the very man!”’

The statement penetrated Shelton like a shock; it was disquieting to perceive that his old friend did not pass the whole of his life at that table in the centre of that room, taking out figures and tracing round undeviating characters on office-stamped paper, but that somewhere (immense vistas of little gray houses suddenly rose before his eyes) he actually lived another life where somebody called him ‘Bob.’ Bob! And

this, too, was a revelation. Bob! Why, of course, it was the only possible name. A bell sounded.

'That's your uncle;' and again the head clerk's voice was impregnated with ironical resentment, as if he had been inexpressibly hurt in some remote part of him. 'Good-bye, sir.'

He seemed to clip off his intercourse as one clips off the electric light. Shelton left him taking out figures, and preceded the red-haired boy to an enormous room in the front where his uncle awaited him.

Edmund Paramor was a medium-sized, upright man of seventy, with a brown face perfectly clean-shaven, whose silky-gray hair was brushed in a cock's comb away from a fine forehead, bald on the left side, to far back on the skull. He stood in front of the hearth facing out into the room, and his movements still had the springy abruptness of men who never grow fat. There was a certain youthfulness, too, in his eyes, yet they had an upward, ascetic look, as though he had been through fire; and his mouth was incurably inclined to curl up suddenly at the corners in surprising smiles. The room was like the man—large, morally large, devoid of red-tape and almost devoid of furniture; no tin boxes of deeds decorated the walls, no papers littered the table; a single bookcase contained a complete edition of the law reports, and resting upon the Commercial Directory was a single red rose in a glass of water. It looked like the abode of a man with a sober magnificence of outlook, of a man who went at once to the heart of affairs, despised haggling, and secured his rights without it, and before the curious suddenness of whose smiles the more immediate kinds of humbug melted away.

'Well, Dick,' said he, 'how's your mother?'

Shelton replied that his mother was well.

'I wish you'd tell her that I'm going to sell her Easterns after all, and put into this Brass thing. You can say it's all right from me.'

Shelton faintly grimaced.

'Mother,' said he, 'always believes things are all right.'

His uncle looked through him with his keen, half-suffering glance, and up went the corners of his mouth.

'She's splendid,' he said.

'Yes,' said Shelton, 'she's splendid.'

The transaction, whatever it was, did not interest him; his uncle's judgment in such matters had a breezy soundness he would never dream of questioning.

'Well, about your settlement;' and Mr. Paramor, touching a bell three times, began walking up and down the room. 'Bring in the draft of Mr. Richard's marriage settlement.'

The stalwart commissionnaire reappeared with a document.

'Not *that*, you idiot!' said Mr. Paramor, kicking a footstool violently; 'the clean draft. . . . Now then, Dick! She's not bringing anything into settlement, I understand; how's that?'

'I didn't want it,' replied Shelton, unaccountably ashamed of himself.

Mr. Paramor's lips quivered; he drew the draft closer, took up a blue pencil, and, squeezing Shelton's arm, began to read. The latter dazedly followed his uncle's rapid exposition of the clauses, and was relieved when he came to a momentary stop.

'If you die and she marries again,' said Mr. Paramor, 'she forfeits her life interest—see?'

'Oh!' said Shelton; 'wait a minute, Uncle Ted.'

Mr. Paramor waited, biting the end of his pencil; a faint gleam flickered on his mouth, and was decorously subdued. It was Shelton's turn to get up and walk about.

'If she marries again,' he kept repeating to himself with a sense of discomfort.

Mr. Paramor was a keen fisherman; he watched his nephew as he might have watched a fish he had just landed.

'It's very usual,' he remarked.

Shelton took another turn, and brought up with his back to the hearth.

'She forfeits,' thought he; 'exactly.'

When he was dead, he would have no other way of seeing that she continued to belong to him. Exactly!

Mr. Paramor's haunting eyes were fastened upon his nephew's face.

'Well, my dear,' they seemed to say, 'what's the matter?'

Exactly! Why *should* she have his money if she married again? She would forfeit it. There was much comfort in the thought. Shelton left the hearth, came back to the table, and carefully reread the clause, as if to put the thing back on a purely business basis, and thereby disguise the real significance of what was passing in his mind. The blue pencil judicially balanced in his uncle's hand made him nervous.

'If I die and she marries again,' he repeated aloud, 'she forfeits.'

What wiser provision for a man passionately in love could possibly have been devised? His uncle's eye

travelled beyond him, as if he humanely disliked to see the last despairing wriggles of his fish.

‘I don’t want to tie her,’ said Shelton suddenly.

The corners of Mr. Paramor’s mouth flew up; his eyes returned to Shelton.

‘You want the forfeiture out?’ he asked.

The blood rushed into Shelton’s face; he felt he had been detected in a piece of sentiment.

‘Ye-es,’ he stammered.

‘Sure?’

‘Quite!’ The answer was a little sulky.

Mr. Paramor’s blue pencil descended upon the clause, his smile writhed up once more, and he resumed the reading of the draft; but Shelton could not follow it, he was too much occupied in considering exactly why his uncle had been amused, and to do this he was obliged to keep his eyes upon him. Those features, just pleasantly rugged; the springy poise of the figure; the hair neither straight nor curly, neither short nor long; the haunting look of his eyes and the humorous look of his mouth; his clothes neither shabby nor dandified; his serviceable, fine hands; above all, the equability of the hovering blue pencil, conveyed the impression of a magnificent balance between heart and head, sensibility and reason, theory and practice. An appreciation of this did not annul in Shelton the sense of having been laughed at.

““During coverture,”” quoted Mr. Paramor, pausing again at the end of another clause; ‘you understand, of course, if you don’t get on and separate, she goes on taking?’

If they didn’t get on! Shelton smiled. Mr. Paramor did not smile, and again Shelton had the sense of

having knocked up against something poised but immovable—like one of the logan-stones of his uncle's West Country. He remarked irritably :

' If we're not living together, all the more reason for her having the more.'

This time Mr. Paramor smiled. It was impossible for Shelton to feel angry at the ironic merriment of those smiles with their sudden grave endings, they were too impersonal ; a whole side of human nature, and not the remark of the moment, seemed to pass before their author.

' If—hum—it came to the other thing,' said his uncle, ' the settlement's at an end as far as she's concerned. We're bound to look at every case, you know, Dick.'

The memory of the play and his conversation with Halidome was still strong in Shelton. He was not one of those smug little gods of propriety who could not face the notion of transferred affections—at a safe distance, that is.

' All right, Uncle Ted,' said he. For one mad moment he was attacked by the desire to ' throw in ' the case of divorce. Would it not be common chivalry to make her perfectly independent to do as she liked, change her affections if she wished, unhampered by money troubles ? You only needed to take out the words ' during coverture.'

Almost anxiously he gazed at his uncle's face. There was no meanness about it, but neither was there any encouragement in the far-sighted look of the brow with its wide sweep of hair. ' Quixotism,' it seemed to say, ' has its merits, of course, but—' The room, too, with its wide horizon and tall windows over the Square, ungarnished with technicalities,

and looking as if it dealt practically with big issues, was discouraging. Innumerable men of good breeding and the soundest principles must have bought their wives there. It was perfumed with the atmosphere of wisdom and law-calf. The aroma of Precedent was too strong; Shelton hesitated, swerved his lance, left the logan-stone untilted, and once more settled down to complete the purchase of his wife.

'I can't conceive what you're in such a hurry about; you're not going to be married till the autumn,' said Mr. Paramor at last, as he finished. Replacing the blue pencil in the rack, he took the red rose from the glass, and, sniffing at it, placed it in the button-hole of his black cut-away coat. 'Will you walk with me as far as Pall Mall?' And with a stretch and yawn he added: 'I'm going to take an afternoon off; too cold for Lord's, I suppose?'

They walked out and down into the Strand.

'Have you seen this new play of Borogrove's?' asked Shelton, as they passed the theatre to which he had been with Halidome.

'I never go to modern plays,' replied Mr. Paramor; 'they're so d——d gloomy.'

Shelton glanced at his uncle; he wore his hat rather on the back of his head, his eyes haunted the end of the street in front, the corners of his mouth had flown up, and he had convulsively shouldered his umbrella.

'Realism's not in your line, Uncle Ted?' queried Shelton.

'Is that what they call putting into words things that can't be put into words?'

'The French succeed in doing it,' replied Shelton, 'and the Russians; why shouldn't we?'

Mr. Paramor stopped to look in at a fishmonger's.

'What's right for the French and Russians, Dick,' he said, 'isn't right for us. When we begin to be *real*, we only really begin to be false. I should like to have had the catching of that fellow; let's send him to your mother.' He went in and bought a salmon. 'Now, my dear,' he continued, as they went on, 'do you mean to say it's decent for men and women on the stage to writhe about like eels? Come, tell me,' and his lips curled up like a German's moustache, 'isn't life bad enough already?'

It suddenly struck Shelton that, in spite of that intensely amused smile, his uncle's face had a kind of crucified look, as if his feelings had worn their way to the surface, like the points of nails through the inner sole of a boot. It was, perhaps, only the stronger sunlight in the open space of Trafalgar Square.

'I don't know,' he replied, trying to be honest at the expense of his uncle's good opinion; 'I think I prefer the truth on the whole.'

'Bad endings and the rest of it!' said Mr. Paramor, pausing under one of Nelson's lions and taking Shelton by a button. 'Truth's the very devil!'

As he stood there, with head very straight, and eyes haunting his nephew's face, there seemed a queer, touching muddle in his optimism—a muddle of tender-heartedness and intolerance, of truth and second-handedness, as if the cause for it were at once too deep and not deep enough. Like the lion beneath which he stood, he seemed with a splendid prudery to defy life to make him look at her in the nude.

'No, my dear,' he said, handing a sixpence to the crossing-sweeper; 'feelings are feelings, not words.'

Like snakes, by Jove ! only fit to be kept in bottles with tight corks. You won't come to my club ? Well, good-bye, old boy ; my love to your mother when you see her ;' and turning up the Square, he left Shelton to go on to his own club, feeling queerly as if he had parted, not from his uncle, but from the nation of which they were both members by birth, blood, and education.

CHAPTER VII

THE CLUB

HE went into the library of his club, and mechanically took up Burke's Peerage. The first words which his uncle had said to him some days ago on hearing of his engagement had been: 'Dennant! Are those the Oxfordshire Dennants? She was a Penguin.'

No one who knew Mr. Paramor could connect him with the word 'snob,' but there had been an 'Ah! that's all right; this is due to us' kind of tone about the remark.

Shelton looked for the name Baltimore: 'Charles Penguin, fifth Baron Baltimore. Issue: Alice, *b.* 184-, *m.* 186- to Algernon Dennant, Esq., of Holm Oaks, Cross Eaton, Oxfordshire.' He put down the Peerage and took up the Landed Gentry: 'Dennant, Algernon Cuffe, eldest son of the late Algernon Cuffe Dennant, Esq., J.P., and Irene, 2nd daur. of the Honble. Philip and Lady Lillian March Mallow; *ed.* Eton and Ch. Ch., Oxford, J.P. for Oxfordshire. *Residence*, Holm Oaks, etc., etc.' Dropping the Landed Gentry, he took up a volume of the 'Arabian Nights,' which some member had left reposing on the book-rest attached to his chair, but instead of reading he kept

looking round the room. In almost every chair, reading or snoozing, were gentlemen who, in their own estimation, might have married Penguins. For the first time, perhaps, it struck him with what majestic leisureliness they turned the pages of their books, trifled with their teacups, or snored lightly. Yet not two of them were alike—a tall man with dark moustache, thick hair, and red, smooth cheeks; another completely bald, with stooping shoulders; a tremendous old buck, with a pointed gray beard and a large white waistcoat; a clean-shaven dapper man past middle age, with a complacent face like a bird's; a long, sallow, misanthropical-looking person; and a sanguine creature asleep. But asleep or awake, reading or snoring, fat or thin, hairy or bald, the insulation of those red or pale faces was complete. They were all persons of good form. And alternately staring at them and reading the '*Arabian Nights*,' Shelton spent the time before dinner. He had not long been seated in the dining-room before a distant connection strolled up and took the next table.

'Ah, Shelton!' said he, 'you're back, then? Somebody told me you were goin' round the world;' and leisurely unrolling a napkin, he scrutinized the menu through his eyeglass. 'Clear soup! . . . Have you read Jellaby's speech? It's amusing to see the way he squashes those fellows. He's the best man in the House, you know; he really is.'

Shelton paused in the act of helping himself to asparagus; he, too, had been in the habit of admiring Jellaby, but now he asked himself, Why? The red, intensely-shaven face of his neighbour above a broad, pure surface of shirt front was slightly swollen by good

humour; his small, very usual, and rather hard eyes were fixed with an introspective look upon the successful process of his own eating.

'*Success!*' thought Shelton, suddenly enlightened—'success is what we worship in Jellaby. We all want success. . . . Yes,' he admitted aloud, 'he's a successful beast.'

'Oh!' said his neighbour, 'I forgot. You're in the other camp, aren't you?'

'No,' said Shelton, who of all things hated to be classified, 'not particularly. How did you get that idea?'

His neighbour looked at him for a negligent second.

'Oh,' said he, 'I somehow thought so;' and Shelton knew that he meant: 'There's something not sound about you.'

'Why do you admire Jellaby?' he asked.

'Knows his own mind,' replied his neighbour; 'it's more than some of 'em do. . . . This whitebait isn't fit for a cat;' and wiping his moustache, he stared hard at the waiter. 'Clever fellow, Jellaby!' he resumed, watching the glass into which the man was pouring Pommery and Greno; 'no nonsense about him! Have you ever heard him speak? It's awfully good sport to watch him sit on those beggars. What a mess they've made of it, eh?' and he laughed, either from appreciation of Jellaby sitting on a small minority, or from appreciation of the champagne bubbles. His laugh had an odd effect on Shelton.

'Minorities are always depressing,' he said dryly.

'Eh? what?' queried his neighbour.

'I mean,' said Shelton, persisting in his sarcasm, and gulping down the sense that he was making a fool of

himself, ‘it’s irritating to look at people who haven’t a chance of success—fellows who make a mess of things, fanatics, and all that.’

His neighbour turned his eyes with an inquisitive stare.

‘Er—yes, quite,’ said he; ‘don’t you take mint sauce? It’s the best part of lamb, I always think.’

The great room with its countless little tables, arranged so that every man might have the moral support of the heavy gold walls to his back, began softly to regain its influence over Shelton. How many times had he not sat there, carefully recognising all his acquaintances, happy if he got the table he was used to, a paper with the latest cricket and racing, and someone to gossip to who was not a bounder, while the pleasant sensation of having drunk just enough stole over his being! Happy! That is, happy as a horse is happy who is never taken out of his stable.

‘Look at poor little Bing puffin’ about,’ said his neighbour with compassionate contempt, indicating a weazened, hunchy waiter, who had been pitchforked by an ironical chance into these halls of success. ‘His asthma’s awfully bad; you can hear him wheezin’ from the end of the street.’

He seemed amused.

‘There’s no such thing as moral asthma, I suppose?’ observed Shelton, with startling abruptness.

His neighbour dropped his eyeglass impatiently.

‘Here, take this away; it’s overdone,’ said he; and, looking at Shelton’s plate, he added: ‘Bring me some lamb.’

When Shelton had finished, he pushed back his table.

‘Good-night! It’s an excellent Stilton,’ said he, with an attempt to cover up his indiscretion.

'Good-night,' nodded his distant connection, raising his eyebrows and dropping his eyes again upon his plate.

In the hall Shelton went from force of habit to the weighing-machine and solemnly took his weight. 'Eleven stone!' he thought; 'I've gone up!' and, clipping a cigar, he sat down in the smoking-room with one of the latest novels.

After half an hour he had occasion to put the book down to relight the cigar, which had gone out. There seemed something rather fatuous about the story, for though it had a tremendous plot, and was full of well-connected people, it had apparently been contrived with great ingenuity to throw no light on anything whatever. He looked at the name of its author, 'a man with a wide circulation'; everybody was highly recommending it. He did not take up the book again, but began thinking, with his eyes on the fire. . . .

Looking up, he saw Antonia's second brother, a subaltern in the Rifles, bending over him with his sunny cheeks and lazy smile; he was evidently a trifle elated.

'Congratulate you, old chap!' he was saying. 'I say, what made you grow that b-b-easty beard?'

Shelton grinned, and turned up his eyes.

"Pillbottle of the Duchess!" read young Dennant, taking up Shelton's rejected tome. 'You've been reading that? Rippin', isn't it?'

'Oh, ripping!' replied Shelton.

'Rippin' plot! When you get hold of a novel you don't want any rot about—what d'you call it?—psychology, you want to be amused.'

'Rather!' murmured Shelton.

‘That’s an awfully good bit where the President steals her diamonds—— There’s old Benjy! Hallo, Benjy !’

‘Hallo, Bill, old man !’

A young, clean-shaven creature approached, whose face and voice and manner were a perfect blend of urbanity and decision, and whose steely geniality was the very hall-mark of success. He nodded to Shelton.

In addition to the young man who was so smooth and hard and cheery, and went by the name of Benjy, a gray, short-bearded gentleman, with misanthropic eyes like a monkey’s, and an unexpected liking for the company of younger men, called Stroud, had come up ; and another man of about Shelton’s age, with a moustache and a bald patch exactly the size of a crown exactly at the top of his head, who might be seen in the club any night of the year when there was no racing out of the reach of London.

‘ You know,’ said young Dennant to Shelton, ‘ that this bounder’—he indicated Benjy by a slap on the knee—‘is going to be spliced to-morrow. Miss Casserol—you know the Casserols—Muncaster Gardens.’

‘ By Jove !’ said Shelton, delighted to be able to say something at last.

‘ Young Champion’s the best man, and I’m second best man. I tell you what, you old beggar,’ he pursued to Shelton : ‘ you’d better come with me and get your eye in ; you won’t get such another chance of practice. Benjy ’ll give you a card.’

‘ Delighted !’ murmured the affable Benjy.

‘ Where is it ?’ asked Shelton politely.

‘ St. Briabas ; two-thirty. Come and see how they do the trick. I’ll call for you about one ; we’ll have

some lunch and go on together ;' and again he patted Benjy's knee.

Shelton consented to this arrangement ; there was a piquancy about the callousness of the affair which made him shiver, and furtively in the interstices of the conversation he eyed Benjy, the steely suavity of whose manner never wavered, and who appeared to have a greater interest in some approaching race than in his coming marriage. But Shelton knew from his own sensations that this could not really be the case ; it was merely a question of 'good form,' the conceit of superior breeding, the necessity of not giving one's self away. And when in turn he noted the eyes of old Stroud fixed on Benjy, amicably malicious under their shaggy eyebrows, and the curiosity which gleamed greedily in the face of the racing man, he felt sorry, somehow.

'Who's that fellow with the game leg ; I'm always seeing him about lately ?' asked the racing man suddenly.

Shelton's attention was drawn to a sallow individual, conspicuous for a want of accuracy in the parting of the hair and a certain restlessness of attitude.

'His name is Bayes,' said old Stroud, whose business it was to know everyone, and beneath the malevolence of whose eyes could be detected a perfectly genuine disapproval ; 'spends half his time among the Chinese —must have a grudge against them, poor devils ! Now he's got a game leg, and can't go there any more.'

'Chinese ? Good Gad ! What does he do to them ?'

'Bibles, perhaps, or guns. Don't ask me ! What do I know about that sort of fellow ? He's an adventurer.'

'Looks a bit of a bounder,' said the racing man.

Shelton gazed at old Stroud's twitching eyebrows ; he

was dimly conscious that it must be annoying for a gentleman whose ideal is a snug thing in the 'Woods and Forests,' and plenty of time for 'Bridge' and gossip at the club, to see people going about with untidily arranged lives. A minute later, however, the man with the 'game leg' passed close to his chair, and then Shelton perceived how very intelligible the resentment of his fellow-members was. He had eyes which, not uncommon in this country, looked like fires behind steel bars; he seemed the very kind of man who might do all sorts of things that were 'bad form,' might even be guilty of chivalry. He looked straight at Shelton, and the uncompromising intensity of his glance gave an impression of rather fierce loneliness; altogether, an improper person to belong to a club. Shelton remembered the words of an old friend of his father's: 'Yes, Dick, all sorts of fellows belong here, and they come here for all sorts o' reasons, and a lot of 'em come because they've got nowhere else to go, poor beggars;' and as he glanced back from the man with the 'game leg' to old Stroud, it occurred to him that after all even he, old Stroud, might be one of these poor beggars, and again he felt sorry. One never knew! A look, however, at Benjy, contained and cheery, restored him. 'Ah, you lucky, unnatural devil!' he mused: '*You* won't have to come here any more!' and the thought of the last evening he himself would before long be spending flooded his mind with an eager sweetness that was actual pain.

'Benjy, I'll play you a h-h-hundred up!' said Bill Dennant.

Stroud and the racing man went to watch the game, and Shelton was left once more in solitary reverie.

'Good form!' thought he; 'that fellow must be made of steel. They'll go on somewhere; stick about half the night playing poker, or some such foolery.'

He went over to the window. Rain had begun to fall, and the streets looked wild and draughty. The cabmen were putting on their coats. Two women scurried by, huddled under one umbrella, and a thin-clothed, dogged-looking scarecrow lounged past with a surly, desperate step. Shelton returned to his chair, threading his way amongst the groups of his fellow-members. A procession of old school and college friends kept filing before his eyes. After all, what had there been in his own education, or theirs, to give them any other standard than this 'good form'? What had there been to teach them a single fact about life? Their imbecility was incredible when you came to think of it. They had all the air of knowing everything, and really they knew nothing—nothing of Nature, Art, Philosophy, or the Emotions; nothing of the bonds that bound people together. Why, even the words were 'bad form'; *everything* outside their own little circle was 'bad form.' They had a fixed point of view over life because they came of certain Schools, Colleges, and Regiments! And they were the people in charge of the State, Laws, Science, Army, Religion. Well, but it was part of a system—the system not to begin too young, to form healthy fibre, and let the after-life develop it!

'Successful!' he thought, nearly stumbling over a pair of patent-leather boots belonging to a moon-faced, genial-looking member with gold nose-nippers; 'oh yes, it's successful!'

Somebody came and picked up from the table the very volume which had originally inspired his train of

thought, and Shelton had the mortification of watching the solemn pleasure with which he sucked it in. By leaning forward he could just see the white of his eye ; there was a torpid, composed abstraction in it. The reader seemed as pleased as Punch ; there was nothing to startle his prejudices or make him think, nothing that worried him by showing what people really felt.

The moon-faced member with the patent boots came up and began talking of his recent experiences at Monte Carlo. He had one or two anecdotes to relate of a scandalous nature, and his broad face beamed, delightfully frank, behind the gold nose-nippers ; he was a large man with such a store of easy, worldly good-humour that it was impossible not to succumb to his gossip, he gave so complete an impression of enjoying life, of doing himself well. He said : ‘ Well, good-night ! I’ve got an engagement ;’ and the certainty he left behind him that that engagement was a soft thing, something, perhaps, charming and illicit, was quite pleasant to the soul.

Miraculously serene was the room, and slowly taking up his glass, Shelton finished his drink, an inexpressible sense of well-being upon him. The sensation of being superior to his environment, to all these fellow-members, was soothing ; he saw through the sham of this club life, the meanness of this worship of success, the sham of these kid-gloved novelists, the sham of ‘ good form,’ and of the terrific decency of our education. It was soothing to see through these things, soothing to be so superior ; and from the padded recesses of his chair he continued to puff smoke and stretch his limbs towards the fire, which burned back at him with a discreet and venerable glow.

CHAPTER VIII

THE WEDDING

PUNCTUAL to his word, Bill Dennant called for Shelton at one o'clock.

'I b-bet old Benjy's feeling a bit cheap,' said he, as they got out of their cab at the church door and passed between the crowded files of unelect, whose semi-pitiful eyes devoured them from the pavement.

The ashy face of a woman with a baby in her arms and two more by her side looked as eager as if she had never been married herself. Shelton went in inexplicably uneasy; the price of his tie was their board and lodging for a week. He followed his future brother-in-law up to a well-advanced pew on the bridegroom's side of the church, for, with intuitive perception of the eternal warfare of sex, each of the opposing parties to this contract had its serried battalion, the arrows of whose mutual suspicion kept glancing across and across the central passage.

Bill Dennant's eyes had begun to twinkle.

'There's old Benjy!' he whispered; and Shelton looked at the hero of the day. A subdued pallor was traceable under the weathered uniformity of his shaven face; but the well-bred, perfectly artificial smile which he bent upon the guests had lost none of its steely

suavity. His costume, the pose of his neat figure, had that studied and unconventional ease which lifts men out of the ruck of common bridegrooms. There were no holes in *his* armour through which the impertinent might pry.

'G-good old Benjy!' whispered young Dennant; 'I say, they look a bit short of class, those Casserols.'

Shelton, who had an acquaintanceship with the bride's family, smiled nervously. The sensuous sanctity all round had begun to affect him. A confused perfume of flowers and dresses fought with the natural odour of the church; the perpetual rustle of whispers and skirts struck a note of eager hypocrisy through the native silence of the aisles. His eyes fixed themselves on the neck of the lady in front, and without in the least desiring to make such a speculation, he wondered whether her face was as charming as the lines of her back in their delicate, skin-tight setting of pearl gray; his eyes wandered on to the chancel with its stacks of flowers, to the grave, business-like faces of the presiding priests; and the organ began rolling out a wedding march.

'They're off!' whispered young Dennant, jogging Shelton's elbow.

He turned, conscious of a shiver running through the audience which reminded him of a bull-fight he had seen in Spain. The bride came slowly up the aisle. Shelton set his teeth. 'Antonia will look like that,' he thought, 'and the church will be filled with people like this. . . . She'll be a show to them!' The bride was opposite now, and by an instinct of common chivalry he actually averted his eyes; it seemed to him a shame to look at that head, downcast above the silver mystery

of her perfect raiment ; the modest head full, doubtless, of devotion and pure yearnings ; the stately head where no such thought as, ‘ How am I looking, this day of all days, before all London ?’ had ever entered ; the proud head, which no such fear as, ‘ How am I carrying it off ?’ could possibly be besmirching.

A perception of the drama enacted before his eyes invaded him ; he set his face, as a man might who suddenly found himself assisting at a sacrifice. The words, however, fell unrelenting on his ears : ‘ For better for worse, for richer for poorer ; in sickness and in health—’ Two perfectly-dressed figures babbling monumental words to a perfectly-dressed crowd, hanging on their lips for a sign of weakness. ‘ Its pitiful ! ’ he thought ; and opening the Prayer Book he turned to the Marriage Service, which he had not looked at since he was a schoolboy, and as he read he had some very curious sensations.

All this would be happening to himself before many months were over ! He went on kneeling and standing in a kind of stupor, until aroused by his companion’s whisper, ‘ No luck ! ’ and while all around rose a resigned rustling of skirts, he saw a tall figure ascend the pulpit and stand motionless. Massive and high-featured, sunken of eye, he towered impressive in splendid cambric and crimson stole above the carved blackness of the pulpit ; it seemed almost as if he had been chosen for his aesthetic qualities. Shelton listened attentively, and was still gazing in a disillusioned manner at the stitching of his suède gloves, when once again the organ broke forth into the Wedding March. Everybody was smiling, and a few were weeping, craning their heads and bending their bodies towards the bride. ‘ Carnival

of second-hand emotions!' thought Shelton; and smiling also, he, too, craned his head and began to brush his hat. Then, smirking at his acquaintances, he made his way in the tail of the crowd towards the door.

He found himself in the Casserols' house at last, going round the presents with the eldest Miss Casserol, a tall girl in pale yellow and violets, who had been the chief bridesmaid.

' Didn't it go off well, Mr. Shelton?' she said.

' Awfully,' replied Shelton.

' I always think it's so awkward for the man waiting up there for the bride to come.'

' Yes,' murmured Shelton.

' Don't you think it's smart, the bridesmaids having no hats?'

Shelton had not noticed this improvement, but he hastened to agree.

' That was my idea; I think it's very chic. They've had fifteen tea-sets--so dull, isn't it?'

' By Jove!' exclaimed Shelton.

' Oh, it's fearfully *useful* to have a lot of things you don't want; of course, you change them for those you do.'

To Shelton's bewildered eyes it seemed that the whole of London had disgorged its shops into the room; he looked at Miss Casserol's face, and was greatly struck by the shrewd acquisitiveness of her small eyes.

' Is that your future brother-in-law?' she asked, indicating Bill Dennant by a little movement of her chin; ' I think he's such a bright boy. I want you both to come to dinner to-night, and help to keep things jolly. It's so deadly after a wedding.'

Shelton accepted the invitation.

They adjourned to the hall now, to wait for the bride's departure, and Shelton looked at her face as she came down the stairs. It was impassive and gay, with a furtive uneasiness in the eyes, and once more he experienced the odd sensation of having sinned against his manhood. Jammed close to him in the crowd was her old nurse, whose puffy, yellow visage was pouted with emotion, while tears rolled into her wrinkles. She was trying to say something, but in the hubbub her farewell, whatever it was, was perfectly inaudible. There was a scamper to the carriage, a flurry of rice and flowers; the shoe was flung against the sharply drawn-up window. Then Benjy's clean-shaven face was seen for a moment, steely and bland, the footman folded his arms, and with a solemn crunch the brougham wheels started. 'How splendidly it went off!' said a voice on Shelton's right. 'She looked a little pale,' said a voice on his left. Shelton put his hand to his forehead, and behind him the old nurse sniffed.

'Dick,' said young Dennant in his ear, 'this isn't good enough ; I vote we b-b-bolt !'

Shelton assented, and as they walked in the direction of Piccadilly he absently listened to his companion's impressions, nor could he have said whether the slight nausea he experienced was due to afternoon champagne or to the ceremony that had gone off so well.

'What's up with you?' asked young Dennant, as they reached the Park ; 'you look as glum as any m-monkey.'

Shelton shrugged his shoulders.

'Nothing,' said he; 'I was only thinking what humbugs we are!'

Bill Dennant stopped in the middle of the crossing and clapped his future brother-in-law on the shoulder.

'Oh,' said he, 'if you're going to talk shop, I'm off.'

CHAPTER IX

THE DINNER

THE dinner at the Casserols' was given to those of the bride's friends who had been most prominent in the day's festivity. Shelton found himself between Miss Casserol and another lady exhibiting very much the same species of bosom, but a different species of shoulder-strap. Opposite to him sat a man with a single diamond stud, white waistcoat, black moustache, and hawklike face. This was, in fact, one of those interesting houses occupied by upper middle-class families who have imbibed a taste for smart society. Its inhabitants, naturally acquisitive, cautious, economical, and tenacious, worshipped the word 'smart.' The result was a kind of heavy-handed frivolousness, an air of thoroughly respectable vice. In addition to the domesticated fast, Shelton had met there one or two of those ladies who, having been divorced, or being in the potential crucible of divorce, are still anxious to maintain their position in smart 'society.' Divorced ladies without such ambitions were never to be found there, for the Casserols had the highest respect for marriage. He had also met there an American lady or so who was 'quite too amusing'—never, of course, an American man—one or more Mesopotamians of a

financial or racing type, and several of those gentlemen who had been, or were about to be, engaged in a transaction which might, or again might not, ‘come off,’ and in conduct of an order which might, or again might not, be found out. He knew perfectly well, however, that the line was always drawn at those in any category who were actually found out, for the value of these ladies and gentlemen was not their claim to pity as outcasts—nothing so sentimental—but their ‘smartness,’ clothes, jokes, racing tips, ‘biking’ parties, motor-cars.

In sum, he knew the house for one of the backbones of Metropolitan gaiety, whose fundamental ‘respectability’ focussed and cemented detached limbs of an entirely different species, in themselves too ‘smart’ to keep their heads above water.

He always felt sorry for his host, a gray-headed, clean-shaven City man, with a long upper lip, curved back, and bald forehead, who just now was trying to live up to a lady the pleasant audacity of whose speech came ringing down the table. He himself had rather abandoned the attempt with his own neighbours, and made love to his dinner, which, surviving the incoherence of the atmosphere in this house, invariably emerged as a work of art, and it was with a certain surprise that he found Miss Casserol again addressing him.

‘I always say that the great thing is to be jolly. If you can’t find anything to make you laugh, pretend you do ; it’s so much smarter to be amusin’. Now don’t you agree?’

The philosophy sounded excellent, and he meekly assented.

‘We can’t all be geniuses,’ she continued, ‘but we can all look jolly.’

Shelton, much ashamed, hastened to look jolly.

The young lady resumed: ‘I tell the governor, when he gets glum, that I shall put up the shutters and leave him. What’s the good of mopin’ and lookin’ miserable? Are you going to the Four-in-Hand Meet? We’re making a party. Such fun; all the smart people!’

The splendour of her shoulders, the frizziness of her hair (which had clearly not been two hours out of the hands of the hairdresser), might have made him doubtful; but the frank shrewdness in her eyes, and her carefully clipped tone of voice, were guarantees that she was part of the element at the table which was really quite respectable. He had never realized before how ‘smart’ she was, and with an effort abandoned himself to a gaiety solid enough to have killed a Parisian.

He asked after her two younger sisters still in the schoolroom.

‘Oh, those children!’ Miss Casserol replied.

Again Shelton felt at a loss; he could not disentangle the sober and genuine family affection in her voice from the off-handed contempt proper to the ‘smart’ young woman.

When the ladies filed out of the room he was left feeling like a man who has been riding upon an unimproved motor-car. He reflected over the expression of Miss Casserol’s eyes when they had rested upon a lady opposite, who was of a true bird-of-prey voluptuousness. ‘What is it,’ the enviousness of their inquisitive glance had seemed to say, ‘that makes her so really “smart”?’ And while seeking for the reason of this he noticed his host pointing out the merits of his port to the hawklike

man, with an expression of deference which was quite pitiful, for the hawklike man was clearly what is called a ‘bad hat.’ What in the name of goodness was this attraction of vice for the middle classes? A craving to be distinguished, a dread of being thought dull, or merely an effect of overfeeding? Again he looked at his host, who had not yet completed the catalogue of his cellar, and again felt sorry for him.

‘So you’re goin’ to marry Antonia Dennant?’ said a voice on his right, with the easy coarseness which is a mark of caste; ‘pretty girl! They’ve a nice place, the Dennants. D’ye know, you’re a lucky feller!’

The speaker was a perennially youthful old baronet, with small eyes, dusky red face, and a peculiar hail-fellow-well-met expression, at once morose and sly. He was always hard up, but being a man of enterprise he knew all the best people, as well as all the worst, so that he dined out every night.

‘You’re a lucky feller,’ he repeated; ‘he’s got some deuced good shootin’, Dennant! They come too high for me, though; never touched a feather the last time I shot there. She’s a pretty girl. You’re a lucky feller!’

‘I know that,’ said Shelton humbly.

‘Wish I were in your shoes. Who was that sittin’ the other side of you? I’m so dashed short-sighted. Mrs. Carruther? Oh ay!’ An expression which, if he had not been a baronet, would have been a leer, passed on to his lips.

Shelton felt that he was referring to the leaf in his mental pocket-book covered with the anecdotes, figures, and facts about Mrs. Carruther. ‘The old ogre means,’ thought he, ‘that I’m lucky because he’s got a blank leaf about Antonia;’ and he actually felt a desire for the

page to be smudged and torn, that he might show how he despised this system of entry. He stared at the old fellow as he leaned forward, with his singular smile and his air of sardonic good-breeding, to listen to a bit of scandal on the other side. His host's voice recalled him :

'Shelton, try that Madeira; you won't get it every day.'

Shelton tried it, and it was like a divine oil poured on the chivalric fire of his sentiments.

The two men to his left were talking.

'What! You don't collect anything?' said the one next him; 'how's that? Everybody collects something. I should be lost without my pictures.'

'No, I don't collect anything. Given it up; I was too awf'ly had over my Walkers.'

Shelton grinned; he had somehow expected a loftier reason, and returned to the Madeira in his glass. That had been 'collected' by his host, and its price was steadily going up! You couldn't get it every day; worth two guineas a bottle! How precious the idea that other people couldn't get hold of it made it seem! Liquid delight; and the price going up! Soon there would be none left; immense! Absolutely no one would be able to drink it!

'Wish I had some of this,' said the old baronet, screwing his purple cheeks round at him; 'but I've drunk all mine.'

'Poor old chap!' thought Shelton; 'after all, he's not a bad old boy. I wish I had his pluck. His liver must be magnificent.' He drained his glass.

The drawing-room was full of people playing a game concerned with horses ridden by jockeys with the latest

seat. With the silent amiability which always seized on him after dinner, he helped to carry on this pursuit till an early hour of the morning. At last he left, exhausted by animation.

He thought of the wedding, and all the energy that had been bestowed on its magnificent insincerity ; he thought over his dinner and the wine he had drunk. His mood of satisfaction had fizzled out ; he felt disillusioned and ungrateful. These people suggested to him an incapacity for passion, even the smartest of them, even the most respectable ; they seemed to weigh pleasure in the scales and to get the most they could for their money.

As he neared home, between the dark, safe houses stretching for miles and miles of security and comfort, his thoughts were full of Antonia ; and just as he reached his rooms he was overtaken by the moment which comes each morning when the town is born again. The first new air had stolen down ; the sky was alive, but not yet with light ; the trees of the Square quivered faintly ; no living creature stirred, and nothing spoke except his own heart. Suddenly the city seemed to breathe, and Shelton perceived that, after all, he was not alone ; an unconsidered trifle with inferior boots was asleep upon his doorstep.

CHAPTER X

AN ALIEN

THE individual on the doorstep had fallen forward over his knees in watchful slumber. No greater air of prosperity clung about him than is conveyed by a rusty overcoat and wisps of cloth in place of socks. Shelton endeavoured to pass unseen, but the sleeper awoke at the sound of the latch-key.

‘Ah, it’s you, monsieur!’ said he, rising. ‘I received your letter this evening, and have lost no time.’ He looked down and tittered, as much as to say: ‘What a state I’m in!'

The young foreigner’s condition was indeed more desperate than on their first meeting, and Shelton invited him upstairs.

‘You can well understand,’ stammered Ferrand, as he followed his host into the chambers, ‘that I didn’t want to miss you this time. When one is like this——’ and a spasm gripped his face.

‘I’m very glad you came,’ said Shelton, swallowing a qualm.

His visitor had a week’s growth of reddish beard on his face; the deep tan of his cheeks gave him a robust appearance at variance with the fit of trembling which seized on him as soon as he had entered the room.

'Sit down—sit down,' said Shelton; 'you're feeling ill!'

Ferrand smiled.

'It's nothing,' said he; 'bad nourishment——'

Shelton left his visitor seated on the edge of a chair, and brought him a whisky-and-soda.

'Clothes,' said Ferrand, when he had drunk it, 'are what I want. These are really not good enough.'

The statement was uncontrovertible, and Shelton, placing a collection of garments in the bath-room, invited his visitor to make himself comfortable. While the latter was completing this process, Shelton enjoyed the sensations of self-denial, hunting up things he did not want, and laying them in two canvas portmanteaus. It was an occasion which enabled him to express his talent for generosity, and he awaited the return of his guest in a state of mind not far removed from emotion. He felt like a prince or a millionaire when parting with a portion of his superfluity; a spasm of secret virtue had attacked him.

The young foreigner at length emerged, still unshaven and wearing no boots, but having in other respects an air of the most gratifying affluence.

'This is rather a different thing,' said he, with a mixture of pride and mockery; 'I can't get the boots on, though'; and, pulling down his, or rather Shelton's, socks, he exhibited sores the size of half a crown. 'One doesn't sow without reaping some harvest or other. My stomach has shrunk,' he added simply. 'To see things one must suffer. *Voyager, c'est plus fort que moi!*'

Shelton failed to perceive that this was one way of disguising the human animal's natural dislike of work

—there was a biting touch of pathos, a suggestion of God-knows-what-might-have-been, about this fellow.

‘I have eaten my illusions,’ said the young foreigner, as he sat in an armchair smoking a cigarette. ‘When you’ve starved a few times, your eyes are opened. *Savoir, c’est mon métier ; mais remarquez ceci, monsieur :* It’s not always the intellectuals who succeed.’

‘But when you get a job,’ said Shelton, ‘you throw it away.’

‘You accuse me of restlessness,’ he replied; ‘shall I explain what I think about that? I’m restless because of ambition; I want to reconquer an independent position. I put all my soul into my trials, but as soon as I see there’s no future for me in that line, I give it up and go elsewhere. *Je ne veux pas être “rond de cuir,”* breaking my back to economize sixpence a day, and save enough after forty years to drag out the remains of an exhausted existence. That’s not in my character.’ He pronounced this ingenious paraphrase of the words ‘I soon get tired of things’ with an air of letting Shelton into a precious secret.

‘Yes; it must be hard,’ agreed the latter.

Ferrand shrugged his shoulders.

‘It’s not all butter,’ he replied; ‘one is obliged to do things that are not too delicate. There’s nothing I pride myself on but frankness.’

Like a good chemist, however, he administered what Shelton could stand in a very judicious way. ‘Yes, yes,’ he seemed to say, ‘you’d like me to think that you have a perfect knowledge of life: no morality, no prejudices, no illusions; you’d like me to think that you feel yourself on an equality with me, one human animal talking to another, without any barriers of position,

money, clothes, or the rest—*ça, c'est un peu trop fort !* You're as good an imitation article as I've come across in your class, notwithstanding your unfortunate education, and I'm really grateful to you, but to tell you everything as it passes through my mind would damage my prospects. You can hardly expect that.'

In one of Shelton's old frock-coat suits he was impressive, with his air of natural and almost sensitive refinement. The room looked as if it were accustomed to him, and more amazing still was the sense of familiarity which he inspired, as though he embodied a part of Shelton's own soul. It came as quite a shock to realize that this young foreign vagabond had taken so great a place in his thoughts. The pose of his limbs and head, irregular but not ungraceful ; his disillusioned lips ; the continual rings of discoloured smoke issuing from them—all signified rebellion, the subversion of law and order. His long, thin, lop-sided nose, the rapid glances of his goggling, prominent eyes, were subtlety itself; the whole figure stood for discontent with the accepted. He might have posed to an artist for a statue of the Ideal.

'How do I live when I'm on the tramp?' said he. 'Well, there are the Consuls. The system is not delicate, but when it's a question of starving, much is permissible ; besides, these gentlemen were created for the purpose. There's a coterie of German Jews in Paris who live entirely on Consuls.' He hesitated for the fraction of a second, and resumed : 'Yes, monsieur ; if you have papers that fit you, you can try six or seven Consuls in a single town. You must know a language or two ; most of these gentlemen are not too well up in the tongues of the country they represent. Obtaining

money under false pretences ? Well, it is. But what's the difference at bottom between all this honourable crowd of directors, fashionable physicians, employers of labour, jerry-builders, military men, country priests, and Consuls themselves perhaps, who take money and give no value for it, and poor devils who do the same at far greater risk ? Necessity makes the law. If those gentlemen were in my position, do you think they would hesitate ?'

Shelton made a wry face.

' You're right,' assented Ferrand instantly ; ' they *would*, but from fear, not principle. One must be hard pressed before committing these indelicacies. Look deep enough, and you'll see what indelicate things are done daily by respectable gentlemen for not half such good reasons as the want of a meal.'

Shelton also took a cigarette—his own income was derived from property for which he gave no value in labour.

' I can give you an instance,' said Ferrand, ' of what can be done by resolution. One day in a German town, *étant dans la misère*, I decided to try the French Consul. As you know, I am not French, but something had to be done. Well, as he refused to see me, I sat down to wait. After about two hours, a voice bellowed :

" ‘ Hasn't the brute gone ? ’ ” and my Consul appears. “ I've nothing for fellows like you,” says he ; “ clear out ! ”

“ ‘ Monsieur,’ ” I answered, “ I'm skin and bone ; I really must have assistance.”

“ ‘ Clear out,’ ” he replies, “ or I'll have you thrown out by the police ! ”

“ I don't budge. Another hour passes, and back he comes.

““ Still here ?” says he. “ Fetch a zergeant.”

‘ The sergeant comes in.

““ Zergeant,” says the Consul, “ durn this creature out.”

““ Sergeant,” I say, “ this house is France !” Naturally, I had made my calculations on that. In Germany they’re not too fond of those who undertake the affairs of the French.

““ He is right,” says the sergeant ; “ I can do nothing.”

““ You refuse ?”

““ Absolutely.”

‘ Well, they showed me in to the Consul at last.

““ What do you think you’ll get by staying ?” says he.

““ I have nothing to eat or drink, and nowhere to sleep,” say I.

““ What will you go for ?”

““ Ten marks.”

““ Here, then, get out !” I can tell you, monsieur, one mustn’t have a thin skin if one wants to exploit Consuls.’

His yellow fingers slowly rolled the stump of his cigarette, his ironical lips flickered. Shelton thought of his own ignorance of life. He could not recollect ever having wanted a meal.

‘ I suppose,’ he said feebly, ‘ you’ve often been without food.’ For, having always been so well fed, starvation had an attraction for him.

Ferrand smiled.

‘ Four days is the longest,’ said he. ‘ You won’t believe that story, however. . . . It was in Paris, and I had lost all my money on the racecourse. There was some due from home which didn’t come, so for four days and nights I lived on water. My clothes

were excellent, I had jewellery; but I never even thought of a pawnbroker. I suffered most from the notion that people might guess my state. You don't recognise me ?'

' How old were you then ?' said Shelton.

' Seventeen ; it's curious what one's like at that age.'

By a flash of insight Shelton saw the well-dressed boy, with smooth, sensitive face, always on the move about the streets of Paris, for fear people should see the condition of his stomach. The story was a valuable commentary.

Ferrand's face suddenly contracted, and water rushed into his eyes.

' I've suffered too much,' he stammered ; ' what do I care now what becomes of me ?'

Shelton was disconcerted, he wished to say something sympathetic, but, being an Englishman, could only fasten his eyes on the cloth.

' Your turn's coming,' he muttered at last.

' When you've lived my life,' broke out his visitor, ' nothing's any good. My heart's in rags. Find me anything worth keeping in this menagerie.'

Moved though he was, Shelton resented this outburst. He wriggled in his chair, a prey to a racial instinct, to an optimism, an over-tenderness, perhaps, of soul that forbade him to expose his own emotions, and recoiled from the revelation of other people's. He could stand it on the stage, he could stand it in a book, but in real life he could not stand it. When Ferrand had gone off with a portmanteau in each hand, he wrote to Antonia :

' . . . The poor chap broke down and sat crying like a child ; but instead of making me feel sorry, it turned

me to stone. The more sympathetic I wanted to be, the gruffer I grew. Is it fear of ridicule, independence, or consideration for others that prevents one from showing one's feelings?’

‘I wonder,’ he thought, as he wrote this sentence, ‘if it’s this which gives us English our reputation, makes us so respected and feared. You can’t respect a man who tells you his feelings.’ He went on to tell her about Ferrand’s starving for four days sooner than face a pawnbroker, and as he read it over before folding it into its envelope, the faces of the three ladies round their snowy oblong of cloth rose before him—Antonia’s face, so fair and calm and wind-fresh; her mother’s face, a little creased by time and weather; the maiden aunt’s, somewhat too thin—and they seemed to lean at him, full of decorous interest, while the words, ‘Oh, that’s *rather* nice!’ rang in his ears. He went out to post the letter himself, and buying a five-shilling order, enclosed it to the little French barber, Carolan, as a reward for delivering his note to Ferrand. He omitted to send his address with the donation, but he could not have said whether the omission was due to delicacy or caution. Beyond doubt, however, on receiving through Ferrand the following reply, he felt both pleased and ashamed of himself:

‘3, BLANK Row,
WESTMINSTER.

‘From every well-born soul humanity is owing. A thousand thanks. I received this morning your postal order; your heart henceforth for me will be placed beyond all praise.

‘J. CAROLAN.’

CHAPTER XI

THE VISION

A FEW days later he received a letter from Antonia which filled him with excitement:

‘ . . . Aunt Charlotte is ever so much better, so mother thinks we can go home—hurrah! But she says that you and I must keep to our arrangement not to see each other till July. There will be something fine in being so near and having the strength to keep apart. . . . All the English are gone. I feel it so empty out here; these people are so funny—all foreign and shallow. Oh, Dick! how splendid to have an idea to look up to! Write at once to Brewer’s Hotel and tell me you think the same. . . . We arrive at Charing Cross on Sunday at half-past seven, stay at Brewer’s for a couple of nights, and go down on Tuesday to Holm Oaks. . . .

‘ Always your
‘ ANTONIA.’

‘ To-morrow!’ he thought; ‘ she’s actually coming to-morrow!’ and leaving his breakfast untouched, he started out to walk off his emotion. His own square ran into one of those slums that still rub shoulders with the most distinguished situations, and in it he

came upon a little crowd gathered round a dog-fight. One of the dogs was in a bad way, but the day was muddy, and Shelton, like any well-bred Englishman had a horror of making himself conspicuous even in a good cause; so he looked for a policeman. One was standing by, to see fair play, perhaps, and Shelton appealed to him. The official, however, could only suggest that he should not have brought out a fighting dog, and advised him to throw cold water over them.

‘It isn’t my dog,’ said Shelton indignantly.

‘Then I should let ‘em be,’ remarked the policeman, a little surprised.

Shelton appealed indefinitely to the lower orders. The lower orders, however, were afraid of being bitten.

‘I wouldn’t meddle with that there job if I was you,’ said one.

‘It’s a nasty breed that,’ said another.

He was therefore obliged to cast his respectability to the winds, and had the satisfaction of hearing his audience guffaw while he spoiled his trousers, his gloves, broke an umbrella, dropped his hat in the mud, and finally separated the dogs. At the conclusion of the ‘job,’ the member of the lower orders said to him in a rather shamefaced manner :

‘Well, I never thought you’d have managed that, sir;’ but, like all men of inaction, Shelton after action was dangerous.

‘D——n it!’ said he, ‘one can’t let a dog be killed;’ and he marched off, towing the injured dog with his pocket-handkerchief, and looking scornfully at innocent passers-by. Having satisfied for once the smouldering fires within him, he felt entitled to hold a low opinion of the man in the street. ‘The brutes,’ he thought,

'won't stir a finger to save a poor dumb creature, and as for policemen——' But as he grew cooler he began to see that people overweighted by 'honest toil' could not afford luxuries like torn trousers or a bitten hand, and that even the policeman, though he had looked so like a demi-god, was absolutely made of flesh and blood. He took the dog home, and, sending for a vet., had him sewn up.

He was already tormented by the doubt whether or no he might venture to meet Antonia at the station, and after sending his servant with the dog to the address indicated on its collar, he formed the resolution to go and see his mother, with some vague notion that she might help him to decide. She lived in Kensington, and, crossing the Brompton Road, he was soon amongst that maze of houses into the fibre of whose structure architects have so cunningly embodied the principle: 'Keep what you have got—wives, money, a good address, and all the blessings of civilization !'

Shelton pondered as he passed house after house of five stories each, and such intense respectability that even dogs have been known to bark at them. His blood was still hot, and it is amazing what small incidents will promote the loftiest philosophy. He had been reading in his favourite review an article eulogizing the freedom and expansion which had made the upper middle class so fine a body of people, and as his eye wandered from side to side, he nodded his head ironically. 'H'm!' he thought, 'freedom and expansion! Freedom and expansion!'

Each house-front was cold and formal, like the shell, as it were, of an owner with from three to five thousand a year, and each one was armoured against the opinion

of its neighbours by a sort of daring regularity. ‘Conscious of my rectitude, and by the strict observance of exactly what is necessary and no more, I am enabled to hold up my head in the world. The person who lives in me has only four thousand two hundred and fifty-five pounds a year, after allowing for income tax.’ Such seemed the legend of each house.

Shelton passed numbers of ladies in ones and twos and threes going out shopping, or to classes of drawing, or cooking, or ambulance. Hardly any men were to be seen, and they were mostly policemen or crossing-sweepers; but a few disillusioned-looking children were being wheeled by fresh-cheeked nurses towards the Park, accompanied by a great army of hairy or hairless dogs.

There was something of her brother’s large liberality about Mrs. Shelton — a tiny lady with affectionate eyes, warm cheeks, and cold feet; fond as a cat of a chair by the fire, and full of the sympathy that has no insight. She kissed Shelton rapturously, and, as usual, began at once to talk of Antonia. For the first time a tremor of doubt ran through her son; his mother’s view of the engagement grated on him like the sight of a blue-pink dress; it was too rosy. That splendid, warm-blooded optimism of hers depressed him; it had too little connection with the reasoning powers.

‘What right,’ he asked himself, ‘has she to be so certain? It seems to me a kind of blasphemy.’

‘The *dear!*’ cooed his mother. ‘Is she coming back to-morrow? Hurrah! how I long to see her!’

‘But you know, Mother, we’ve agreed not to meet again till July.’

Mrs. Shelton rocked her foot, and, holding her head

on one side like a little bird, looked at her son with shining eyes.

' Dear old Dick ! ' she said, ' how happy you must be ! '

Half a century of sympathy with marriages of all kinds—good, bad, or indifferent—beamed from her.

' I suppose,' said Shelton gloomily, ' I ought not to go and see her at the station.'

' Cheer up ! ' replied Mrs. Shelton, and Shelton felt profoundly dejected.

That 'cheer up !'—the panacea which had carried his mother blind and bright through all evils—was as devoid of meaning to him as wine without flavour.

' And how's your sciatica ? ' he asked.

' Oh, pretty bad,' returned Mrs. Shelton ; ' I expect it's all right, really. Cheer up ! ' She stretched her little figure, and canted her head still more.

' What a wonderful woman ! ' thought Shelton. She had, in fact, like so many of her fellow-countrymen, irretrievably mislaid the dark side of things, and, enjoying the benefits of every species of orthodoxy with a clear conscience, had kept as young in heart as a girl of thirty.

Shelton left her house as unable to decide whether he might meet Antonia as when he entered it. He spent a most restless afternoon.

The next day—the day of Antonia's arrival—was a Sunday. He had made Ferrand a promise to go with him to hear an amateur sermon in the slums, and, catching at any diversion which might allay his excitement, he fulfilled it. The preacher in question, so Ferrand told him, had an original method of distributing the funds he obtained from his sermons, on the principle that male sheep should have nothing at

all, ugly female sheep very little, and pretty female sheep as much as possible. Ferrand suggested an inference, but he was a foreigner. The Englishman preferred to bestow the benefit of the doubt and regard the preacher as guided by a purely abstract love of beauty. His eloquence was at any rate beyond question, and Shelton came out feeling rather sick.

It was not yet seven o'clock, so entering an Italian restaurant to kill the remaining half hour before Antonia's arrival, he ordered a bottle of wine for his companion, a cup of coffee for himself, and, lighting a cigarette, compressed his lips to subdue the spasms of nervousness, the strange, sweet sinking, in his heart. He was pale, and his eyes rested defiantly on everything in turn. His companion, ignorant of this emotion, drank his wine, crumbled his roll, and blew cigarette-smoke through his nostrils, while he glanced caustically at the rows of little tables, the cheap mirrors, the hot, red velvet, the chandeliers. His juicy lips seemed to be murmuring: 'Ah! if you only knew the dirt behind these feathers!' Shelton watched him with a kind of disgust. Though his clothes were now so nice, his nails were not quite clean, and the tips of his fingers seemed yellow to the bone. An anaemic waiter in a shirt four days old, with grease-spots on his garments and a crumpled napkin across his arm, stood leaning an elbow amongst dishes of doubtful fruits, reading an Italian journal. Resting his tired feet in turn, he looked like a figure-head of overwork, and when he moved, each limb accused the sordid smartness of the walls. In the far corner sat a lady eating an omelette, and, mirrored opposite, her feathered hat, her short, round face, with its coat of powder and dark eyes, gave

Shelton a shiver of disgust. His companion's eyes, however, rested long and subtly upon her.

'Excuse me a moment, monsieur,' said he at length. 'I think I know that lady;' and, leaving his host, he crossed the room, accosted her with a bow, and sat down. With a delicacy not far removed from Pharisaism, Shelton refrained from glancing in their direction. It was some time before Ferrand came back, and when he did so, the lady rose and left the restaurant; she had been crying. The young foreigner was flushed, his face contorted; he left the rest of his wine untouched.

'I was right,' said he unexpectedly, as they walked away; 'she's the wife of an old friend. I used to know her well.'

He was suffering from emotion, but anyone less absorbed than Shelton might have noticed a kind of relish about the tone of his voice, as though he were savouring one of life's dishes, and glad to have something new and spiced with tragic sauce to set before his patron.

'You can find her story by the hundred in your streets, but nothing hinders these paragons of virtue'—and he nodded at the stream of carriages—'from turning up their eyes when they see ladies of this description.'

And Shelton realized with a shock how far his class removed him from the right to express sympathy.

'She came to London three years ago. After a year one of her little boys took fever—the shop was avoided in consequence—then her husband caught it, and died. There she was, left with two children and everything gone to pay the debts. She tried to get work; no one helped her. There was no money to pay anyone to stay

with the children ; all the work she could get in the house was not enough to keep them alive. She's not a strong woman. Well, she put the children out to nurse, and went to the streets. The first week was frightful, but now she's accustomed to it—one gets accustomed to anything.'

'Can nothing be done ?' asked Shelton, startled.

'No,' returned his companion. 'I know that sort ; if they once take to it it's all over. They get used to luxury. One doesn't part with luxury after tasting destitution. She tells me she does very nicely ; the children are happy ; she's able to pay well and see them sometimes. She was a girl of good family, too, who loved her husband, and gave up much for him. What would you have ? Three-quarters of your virtuous ladies placed in her position would do the same if they had the necessary looks.'

It was evident that he had not got over the shock, and Shelton understood for the first time that personal acquaintance makes a difference, even in a vagabond.

'This is her beat,' said the young foreigner, as they passed the illuminated crescent, where nightly the shadows of hypocrites and unfortunates fall ; and Shelton went from these comments on Christianity to the platform of Charing Cross Station. There, as he stood waiting in the shadow with his heart in his mouth, it struck him as unaccountable and almost revolting that he should have come to this meeting fresh from Ferrand's society.

Presently, amongst the stream of travellers, he saw Antonia. She was close to her mother, to whom a footman was talking ; behind were a maid carrying a bandbox and a porter with the travelling bags. Her

figure, with its throat settled in the collar of her cape, slender, tall, and severe, looked impatient and remote amongst all the bustle. Her eyes, shadowed by the journey, glanced eagerly about, as if welcoming all she saw ; a wisp of fair hair was loose over her ear, her cheeks glowed rosy and cold. She caught sight of Shelton, and bending her neck, stag-like, stood looking at him ; a brilliant smile parted her lips, and Shelton trembled. Here was the fleeting embodiment of all he had desired for weeks. He could not tell what was behind that smile—a passionate aching or only some ideal, some chaste and glacial intangibility. It seemed to be shining past him into the gloom of the station. There was no trembling and uncertainty, no pale rage of possession in the brilliancy of that smile ; it had the gleam of fixedness, like the smile of a star. What did it matter ? She was there, beautiful as a young day, and smiling at him ; and she was his, only divided from him by a space of time. He took a step, but her eyes fell at once with a gleam of discomfiture, her face regained its aloofness, and he saw her, encircled by mother, maid, footman, and porter, take her seat in the carriage and drive away.

He walked out. It was over ; she had seen him and smiled, but alongside his delight lurked a feeling of unreality, and, by a bitter freak, not *her* face came up before him, but the face of the lady in the restaurant—short, round, and powdered, with black-circled eyes. It gave him a shock. What right had he to despise them ? Had *they* mothers and maids, porters and footmen ? A second shiver ran through him, but this time of physical disgust, and with it vanished that powdered face with dark-fringed eyes, and he entered his club

intoxicated by the vision of the fair, remote figure of the railway-station.

He sat long over dinner, drinking and dreaming ; he sat long in the smoking-room, inhaling the perfume of his cigar and dreaming, and when at length he drove away, wine and thoughts fumed in his brain. The dance of lamps in St. James's Park, the cream-cheese moon, the rays of clean wet light on his horse's harness, the jingling of the cab bell, the whirring wheels, the night air and the branches, all embodied some white idea, some emblem of hope and fair attainment. He threw back the doors of his hansom to feel more thoroughly the touch of the warm breeze. The sight of the crowds on the pavement gave him a sense of inexplicable delight ; they were like shadows in some great illusion, insignificant, happy shadows, thronging and wheeling round the single figure that filled his world.

CHAPTER XII

ROTTEN ROW

WITH a headache and a sense of restlessness at once hopeful and unhappy, Shelton mounted his hack next morning for a gallop in the Park.

In the sky was one of those odd minglings of languor and violence that come with the spring and linger, belated, sometimes into the middle of May. The clouds were of a hue more intense than an Emperor's cloak, the trees and beds of young flowers wore a look of awakening in the gleams of passionate light that bathed everything, stealing down from behind the purple of the clouds. The air was clean-washed, and the passers-by seemed all to wear an air of careless tranquillity, as if their anxieties were paralyzed by the irresponsibility of the firmament.

Thronged by riders splashing through the slush of the late spring showers, the Row was all astir, for the weather seemed to have breathed the gaiety of gamblers into the very horses.

Near to Hyde Park Corner a figure by the rails caught Shelton's eye. Straight and thin, with one shoulder humped a little, as if its owner were reflecting, clothed in a frock-coat and surmounted by a brown felt hat pinched up with a kind of undefinable lawlessness,

this figure was so distinctly detached from its surroundings that it would have been noticeable anywhere. As a matter of fact it belonged to Ferrand, obviously waiting till it was time to breakfast with his patron. Shelton found pleasure in thus observing him unseen, and sat quietly on his horse, hidden behind a tree.

It was just at that spot where riders, unable to get further, are for ever wheeling their horses for another turn; and there Ferrand, the bird of passage, immovable on his two feet, with his head a little to one side, stood watching them canter, trot, wheel, up and down, up and down.

Three men walking along the rails had just made out an acquaintance in one of the horsewomen, and were snatching off their hats one after the other at exactly the same angle and with precisely the same air, as though in the modish performance of this ancient rite they were satisfying some instinct very dear to them.

Shelton could not help noting the curl of the young foreigner's lip as he saw this sight. 'Many thanks, gentlemen,' it seemed to say; 'in that charming little action of yours you have shown me your souls.'

What a singular gift the fellow had of divesting people and things of their outer garments, of tearing away the veil of their shams, and their phylacteries! Shelton turned his back impatiently and rode off; his thoughts were with Antonia, and he did not want the glamour stripped away.

He had risen the dip, and was cantering gently under the trees, glancing at the sky that every moment threatened to discharge a violent shower of rain, when suddenly he heard his name called from behind, and

who should ride up to him on either side but Bill Dennant and—Antonia herself!

They had been galloping, and she was flushed—flushed as when she stood on the old tower at Hyères, but with a radiance of irresponsibility different from the calm conquering radiance of that other moment. To Shelton's delight and amazement she fell into line with him, and all three went galloping along the strip between the trees and the rails. The look she had given him seemed to say: ‘I don't care if it is forbidden!’ but she did not speak. She was on his left, and he could not take his eyes off her. How lovely she looked, with the resolute curve of her figure, the glimpse of gold under her hat, that glorious colour in her cheeks, as if she had been kissed by the day itself!

‘It's so splendid to be at home! Let's go faster!’ she cried out to the space in front of her.

‘Take a pull. We shall get r-run in,’ grumbled her brother, with a chuckle.

They reined in round the bend, and jogged more soberly down the far side; but still not a word did she speak to Shelton, and Shelton in his turn spoke only to Bill Dennant. He was taciturn with happiness, and he was afraid to speak, for by instinct he knew that her mind was dwelling on this chance and forbidden encounter in a way quite different from his own.

They approached Hyde Park Corner, where Ferrand was still standing against the rails, and Shelton, who had forgotten his very existence, suffered a shock when his eyes fell suddenly on that impassive figure. He was about to raise his hand to his hat, when he saw that the young foreigner, noting his instinctive sensation, had at once adapted himself to it. They again passed without

greeting, unless that swift inquisition, followed by glassy unconsciousness in Ferrand's eyes, could so be called. But the feeling of idiotic happiness had left Shelton, and he grew irritated at this silence. It seemed to him more and more tantalizing and strange, for Bill Dennant had lagged behind to speak to a friend; Shelton and Antonia were alone, walking their horses, without a word, and not even looking at each other. At one moment he thought of galloping ahead and leaving her, at another of breaking the vow of muteness she seemed to be imposing on him, and he kept thinking: 'It ought to be either one thing or the other. I can't understand this.' He was secretly disturbed by her calmness; there was in it a sure and practical knowledge of just how far she might go that seemed to come to her by instinct. It showed a power of judicially, unsentimentally fixing a limit that was surely cold-blooded. In her happy young beauty and radiant calmness she summed up something he was always encountering, some perfectly sane and consistent element in nine out of ten of the people he knew. 'I can't stand this long,' he thought, and all of a sudden began to speak; but as soon as he did so, she frowned and put her horse into a canter. When he came up with her she was smiling, and holding up her face to catch the raindrops which had begun to fall. She gave him a nod, and waved her hand as a sign for him to go; and when he would not, she frowned again. He saw Bill Dennant posting after them, and suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of the ridiculous, he gave her the oddest mixture of frown and smile, lifted his hat, stuck his heels into his horse, and galloped ahead.

The rain was coming down in torrents now, and everyone scurrying for shelter. He looked back at the bend, and could still make out Antonia riding leisurely, with her face upturned, as if revelling in the shower. Why hadn't she either cut him altogether or simply taken the sweets the gods had sent? It seemed to him wicked to have wasted such a chance, and ploughing back to Hyde Park Corner, he kept turning his head to see if by any chance she had relented.

His irritation soon vanished, but his longing remained. Was ever anything so beautiful as she had looked with her face turned to the rain? Odd how she seemed to like rain. It suited her, too—suited her ever so much better than the sunshine of the South. Yes, she was very English! Puzzling and fretting, he reached his rooms. Ferrand had not arrived, and, in fact, did not come at all that day. His non-appearance afforded Shelton another proof of the queer delicacy that went hand in hand with his perverse cynicism. In the afternoon he received a note from Antonia :

' . . . You see, Dick' (he read) ' I ought to have cut you; but I felt too crazy this morning—everything seems so jolly at home, even this stuffy old London. Of course, I wanted to talk to you badly—there are heaps of things one can't say by letter—but I should have been sorry afterwards. I told mother, of course. She said I was quite right, but I don't think she took it in. Don't you feel that the only thing that really matters is to have an idea, and to keep it so safe that you can always look forward and feel that you have been—— I can't exactly express what I mean.'

Shelton lit a cigarette and frowned. It seemed to him queer that she should set more store by an 'idea' than by the fact that they had met for the first and only time in many weeks.

'I suppose she's right,' he thought—'I suppose she's right. I ought not to have tried to speak to her, but how could I help it?' and, as a matter of fact, he did not at all feel that she was right.

CHAPTER XIII

AN 'AT HOME'

ON Tuesday morning he wandered off early in the direction of Paddington, hoping for a chance view of her on her way down to Holm Oaks; but the sense of the ridiculous, on which he had been nurtured, was strong enough to keep him from actually entering the station and lurking about the booking-office till she came. With a pang of disappointment he retraced his steps from Praed Street to the Park, and once there made no further attempt to waylay her. He paid a round of calls in the afternoon, mostly upon her relations, and especially sought out Aunt Charlotte, to whom he dolorously related his encounter in the Row. But she found it 'rather nice,' and on his pressing her with his view of the matter almost burst forth with the opinion that Antonia had acted in 'quite a romantic way, don't you know.'

'Still, it's very hard,' said poor Shelton; and he went away more disconsolate than ever.

As he was dressing for dinner his eye fell on a card in his looking-glass announcing the 'at home' of one of his cousins. Her husband was a composer, and he had a vague idea that he would find at the house of a composer some quite unusually free kind of atmosphere.

After dining at the club, therefore, he set out for Chelsea. The party was held in a large room on the ground-floor, which was already crowded with people when Shelton entered. They stood or sat about in groups with fixed smiles on their lips, and the light from balloon-like lamps fell in patches on their heads and hands and shoulders. Someone had just finished rendering on the piano a composition of his own. An expert could at once have picked out from amongst the applauding company those who were musicians by profession, for their eyes scintillated, and a certain acidity pervaded the deprecating enthusiasm of their voices. This freemasonry of professional intolerance flew from one to the other like a breath of unanimity, and the faint shrugging of shoulders was as harmonious as though one of the high windows had been opened suddenly, admitting a draught of the chill May air.

Shelton made his way up to his cousin—a fragile, gray-haired woman in black velvet and Venetian lace, whose starry eyes beamed at him, until her duties, after the custom of social gatherings, obliged her to break off her conversation just as it became interesting. He was passed on to another lady who was already talking to two gentlemen, and their volubility being greater than his own, he fell back into his usual position of observer. Instead of the profound questions he had somehow expected to hear exploited, everybody, with remarkable fluency, seemed to be detailing musical and artistic gossip, or seriously searching the heart of such topics as, where to go for the summer, or how to get new servants. Trifling with coffee-cups, they dissected their fellow-artists in the same way as his Society friends of the other night had dissected the fellow

'smart'; and the gleam of varnish on floor, and pictures, and piano was subtly reflected on all the faces round. Paralyzed by this loquacity, Shelton moved from group to group disconsolate in accordance with his introductions, smiling inanely.

A tall, imposing person stood under a Japanese print holding the palm of one hand outspread, his unwieldy trunk, thin legs, and benign smiles wobbling slightly in concert to the ingratiating tone of his voice.

'War,' he was saying, 'is not necessary. War is not necessary. I hope I make myself clear. War is not necessary; it depends on nationality, but nationality is not necessary.' He inclined his head to one side. 'Why do we have nationality? Let us do away with boundaries—let us have the warfare of commerce. If I saw France looking at Brighton'—he inclined his head to the other side, and beamed down at Shelton as if conferring a blessing—'what should I do? Should I say: "Hands off"? No. I should say: "Take it—take it!"' He smiled with a sort of fatal archness: 'But do you think they would?'

Shelton's eyes were fascinated by the softness of his contours.

'The soldier,' resumed the speaker, 'is necessarily on a lower plane—intellectually—oh, intellectually—than the philanthropist. His sufferings are less acute; he enjoys the compensations of advertisement—you admit that?' he breathed persuasively in Shelton's face. 'For instance—I am quite impersonal—I suffer; but do I talk about it?' There was no alternative left to Shelton but to gaze again at the well-filled waistcoat, and possibly this was disconcerting, for its owner formulated his argument another way. 'I have one acre and one

cow, my brother has one acre and one cow : do I seek to take them away from him ?'

Shelton hazarded : 'Perhaps you are not the stronger.'

'Come, come ! Take the case of women : now, I consider our marriage laws barbarous.'

Shelton began to conceive a respect for them ; he made a comprehensive gesture, and edged himself into the conversation of another group, for fear of having all his prejudices overturned. Here an Irish sculptor, standing plastically in a curve, was saying furiously : 'Bees are not bhumpkins, d——n their sowl !' A Scotch painter, listening with a curly smile, seemed to be trying to compromise this proposition, which appeared to have some relation to the middle classes ; and though fully agreeing with the Irishman, Shelton felt nervous over his discharge of electricity. Next to them two American ladies, assembled under the tent of hair belonging to a writer of songs, were discussing the emotions aroused in them by one of Wagner's operas.

'It produces a strange condition of affairs in me,' said the thinner of the two.

'It's just divine,' said the fatter.

'I don't know if you can call the fleshly lusts divine,' replied the thinner, looking into the eyes of the writer of songs with a dry twinkle.

Amidst the hum of voices and the fumes of cigarette-smoke, a sense of hidden formality haunted Shelton. He had become sandwiched between a Dutchman and a Prussian poet ; he could understand neither of his neighbours, so, merely assuming an intelligent expression, he fell to thinking that an assemblage of free spirits is as much bound by the convention of exchang-

ing ideas, as commonplace people are by the convention of having none to exchange. He could not help wondering whether, in the bulk, they were not just as interdependent as the inhabitants of those mansions in Kensington ; whether, like locomotives, they could run at all without these opportunities for blowing off steam, and what would be left when the steam had escaped. Somebody began to play the violin, and he let his glance travel over the conscious and unconscious attitudes of the listeners. The violin ceased, and close to him a group began talking ethics. Faint mockings of aspirations were in the air all round, like a lot of escaped ghosts. He had never realized before that, if tongue be given to them, the flavour vanishes from ideas which haunt the soul.

Again the violinist played.

‘Cock gracious !’ said the Prussian poet, falling suddenly into English as the fiddle ceased : ‘*Colossal ! Aber, wie er ist grossartig !*’

‘Have you read that thing of Besom’s ?’ asked a shrill voice behind Shelton.

‘Oh, my dear fellow ! too horrid for words ; he ought to be hanged !’

‘The man’s dreadful,’ pursued the shrill voice, now shriller than ever ; ‘nothing but a volcanic eruption would cure *him*.’

Shelton turned in alarm to look at the authors of these sanguinary statements, but they were merely two literary men criticising a contemporary.

‘*C'est un grand naïf, vous savez,*’ said the second speaker.

‘These fellows don’t exist,’ resumed the first, and Shelton was struck by the look in his eyes ; they were

small, and gleamed with a green light, and his whole face had a look as if he gnawed himself. Though not a literary man, Shelton could not help recognising from the sight of those eyes and the sound of that voice what an intimate joy it had given him to utter the magic words, 'These fellows don't exist!'

'Poor Besom! You know what Moulter said. . . .'

Shelton turned away; he felt a little sick, as if he had been too close to someone whose hair smelt of cantharides. He crossed to the door, and, looking round the assembly, involuntarily frowned; with the exception of his cousin he seemed the only person in the room of English blood. The rest were Americans, Mesopotamians, Irish, Italians, Germans, Scotch, and Russians. He was not contemptuous of them for being foreigners—he was not a stupid man—it was simply that God and the climate had made him different by a skin or so.

But at this point his conclusions were falsified (as usually happens with conclusions) by his introduction to a full-blooded Englishman—a Major Somebody, who, with smooth hair, blond moustache, gray eyes, and neat clothes, seemed a little astonished at himself. Shelton took a liking to him at first sight, partly from a fellow-feeling of dumbness, and partly because of the gentle smile with which he was looking at his own wife. Almost before he had said 'How do you do?' however, he was plunged into a discussion on Imperialism.

It had proceeded for some time, when, squeezing his hands together and shaking them at the soldier in the effort to express exactly what he felt, Shelton made the following curious remark :

'Admitting all that, what I hate is the humbug with

which we pride ourselves on benefiting the whole world by our methods and civilization.'

The soldier turned his reasonable eyes on the speaker.

'But *is* it humbug, you know?' said he.

Shelton saw the bottom of his contention dropping out. Quite so; if we really thought it, was it humbug? He felt ashamed of using his hands to support his arguments while his opponent's remained so quietly in their pockets.

'Why should *we*,' he replied, 'a small portion of the world's population, assume that our standards are the proper ones for every kind of race? If it's not humbug, it's sheer stupidity.'

The soldier, without taking his hands out of his pockets, but by a forward movement of his face, showing that he was both just and sincere, replied :

'Well, it must be a good sort of stupidity; it makes us the nation we are.'

Shelton felt dazed; he agreed, and did not agree. The conversation buzzed around him; he heard the personage under the Japanese print say something or other about altruism, and in his voice a something seemed to murmur: 'Oh, I do so hope I make a good impression!'

He looked straight at the soldier's clear-cut head with its open eyes, the tiny crow's-feet at their corners, and the conventional untwisted moustache; he envied the calm certainty of the convictions lying under that sleek, well-parted hair.

'I would rather we were men first and Englishmen afterwards,' he muttered; 'I think it's all a sort of national illusion, and I can't stand illusions.'

'If you come to that,' said the soldier, 'the world lives by illusions. I mean, if you look at history, you'll see that the creation of illusions has always been her business, don't you know.'

Shelton was unable to deny this.

'So,' continued the soldier (who was evidently a highly intelligent man), 'if you admit that movement, labour, progress, and all that, has been properly given to building up these illusions, that—er—in fact, they're what you might call—er—the outcome of the world's crescendo'—he rushed his voice over this phrase as if ashamed of it—'why do you want to destroy them ?'

Shelton thought a moment, then, squeezing his body with his folded arms, replied :

'The past has made us what we are, of course, and can't be destroyed; but how about the future? It's surely time to let in a little air. Cathedrals are all very fine, and everybody likes the smell of incense; but when they've been for centuries without ventilation you know what the atmosphere's like.'

The soldier smiled.

'By your own admission,' he said, 'you'll only be creating a fresh set of illusions.'

'Yes,' answered Shelton, 'but at all events they'll be the honest necessities of the present.'

The pupils of the soldier's eyes contracted; he evidently felt that the conversation was slipping into vague generalities eminently un-English, and he answered :

'I can't see, you know, how thinking small beer of ourselves is going to do us any good!'

He had come back to the necessity of doing good to one's self, and Shelton felt in danger of being thought unpractical in giving vent to the remark :

'One must trust to one's reason ; I never can persuade myself that I believe what I don't.'

A minute later, with a cordial handshake, the soldier took his departure, and Shelton watched his courteous figure following his wife out of the room.

'Dick, may I introduce you to Mr. Wilfrid Curly?' said his cousin's voice behind him, and he found his hand being diffidently shaken by a fresh-cheeked youth with a dome-like forehead, who was nervously saying :

'How do you do? Yes, I am very well, thank you!'

He now remembered that when he had first come in he had watched this youth, who had been standing in a corner indulging in private smiles. He had an uncommon look, as though he were in love with life—as though he regarded it as a strange creature to whom one could put questions up to the very end—interesting, slightly humorous, perfectly earnest questions. He had an appearance at once of diffident amiability and of complete independence, and he, too, was English.

'Are you good at argument?' said Shelton, who did not know what to say.

The youth smiled, blushed, and, putting back the hair from his forehead, said :

'Yes—no—I don't know; I think my brain doesn't work fast enough for argument. You know how many motions of the brain-cells go to each remark. It's awfully interesting;' and bending from the waist in a sort of mathematical attitude, he extended the palm of one hand, and began to explain.

Shelton stared at the youth's hand, at his frowns and the taps he gave his forehead while he found the

exact expression of his meaning ; he was intensely interested. Suddenly, however, the youth looked at his watch, and blushed brightly.

'I'm afraid I have to go,' he said ; 'I have to be at the "Den" at eleven.'

'I must be off, too,' said Shelton ; and making their adieux together, they both sought out their hats and coats in the hall.

CHAPTER XIV

THE NIGHT CLUB

'MAY I ask,' said Shelton, as he and the youth issued into the chilly street, 'what it is that you call the "Den?"'

His companion smiled.

'Oh,' he replied, 'the night club. We take it in turns. Thursday is my night. Would you like to come? You see a lot of types. It's just round the corner.'

Shelton digested a momentary hesitation, and said: 'Yes, immensely.'

They reached the corner house in the angle of a dismal street, through the open door of which two men had just gone in. Following, they ascended some wooden, newly-washed stairs, entered a large boarded room smelling of sawdust, gas, stale coffee, and old clothes, and furnished with a bagatelle board, two or three wooden tables, some wooden forms, and a wooden book-case. Seated on these wooden chairs, or standing about, were youths, and one or two older men of the working class, who struck Shelton as looking peculiarly dejected. One was reading, one against the wall was drinking coffee with a disillusioned air, two were playing chess, and a group of four made a ceaseless clatter on the bagatelle board.

A little man in a dark suit, with a pale face, thin, compressed lips, and deep-set, black-encircled eyes, who was evidently in charge, came up to them with an anaemic smile.

'You're rather late,' he said to Curly, and, looking ascetically at Shelton, asked, without waiting for an introduction: 'Do you play chess? There's young Smith wanting a game.'

A youth with a wooden face, who was already seated before a fly-blown chessboard, asked him drearily if he would have black or white. Shelton took white; he was oppressed by the stale odour of the room, a peculiar virtuous stuffiness.

The little man with the deep eyes came up, and stood in an uneasy attitude watching the game.

'Your play's improving, young Smith,' he said presently; 'I should think you'd be able to give Bartlett a knight.' His eyes, resting on Shelton, had a fanatical dreariness; a suffering twang was audible in the monotonous tones that issued from his thin lips, which he seemed continually sucking in, as though determined to subdue all evidences of the flesh. 'You should come here often,' he said to Shelton, as the latter received checkmate; 'you'd get some good practice. We've several very fair players. You're not as good as Jones or Bartholomew,' he added to Shelton's opponent, as though he felt it a duty to put the latter in his place. 'You ought to come here often,' he repeated to Shelton; 'we have a lot of very good young fellows;' and, with a touch of complacency, he glanced round the dismal room. 'There are not so many here to-night as usual. Where are Toombs and Body?' he asked of young Smith.

Shelton, too, looked anxiously round. He could not help a feeling of sympathy with Toombs and Body.

'They're getting slack, I'm afraid,' said the little man with the deep eyes: 'our principle is to amuse everyone. Excuse me a minute; I see Carpenter's doing nothing.' He crossed over to the man who had been drinking coffee, but Shelton had barely the time to glance at his recent opponent and try to think of a remark, before he was back again. 'Do you know anything about astronomy?' he asked of Shelton. 'We have several very interested in astronomy; if you could talk to them a little it would help a great deal.'

Shelton made a motion of alarm.

'Please—no,' said he; 'I——'

'I wish you'd come sometimes on Wednesdays; we have most interesting talks, and a service afterwards. We're always anxious to get new blood;' and his suffering eyes searched Shelton's brown and rather amiable face, as though trying to discover of what use he could be. 'Young Curly says you've been round the world; you could describe your travels.'

'May I ask,' said Shelton, 'how your club' is made up?'

Again a touch of complacency, like some blessed assuagement, rested upon the little man's countenance.

'Oh,' he said, 'we take anybody, unless there's anything against them, of course. The Day Society sees to that. Of course, we shouldn't take anyone if they were to report against them. You ought to come to our committee meetings; they're on Mondays at seven. The women's side, too.'

'Thank you,' said Shelton; 'you're very kind——'

'We should be pleased,' said the little man; and his face seemed to suffer more than ever. 'They're mostly young fellows to-night, but we have married men, too. Of course, we're very careful about that,' he added hastily, as though he might have injured Shelton's prejudices—'that, and drink, and anything criminal, you know.'

'And do you give pecuniary assistance, too?' asked Shelton.

'Oh yes,' replied the little man; 'if you were to come to our committee meetings you would see for yourself. Everything is most carefully gone into; we endeavour to sift the wheat from the chaff.'

'I suppose,' said Shelton, 'you find a great deal of chaff?'

The little man smiled a suffering smile. The twang of his toneless voice was a trifle shriller as he replied:

'I was obliged to refuse a man to-day—a man and a woman, quite young people, with three small children. He was ill and out of work; but on inquiry we found that they were not man and wife.'

There was a slight pause; the little man's eyes were fastened on his nails, and, with an appearance of enjoyment, he began to bite them. Shelton's face had grown a trifle red.

'And what becomes of the woman in a case like that?' he said slowly. 'I suppose she has to go on the streets?'

The little man's gaze seemed to smoulder as he suddenly turned it up to Shelton.

'We make a point of not encouraging sin,' he replied. 'Excuse me for a minute; I see they have finished bagatelle.'

He hurried away, and a moment later the wooden clack of the bagatelle balls began again. He himself was playing with a sort of cold and spurious energy, running round after the balls and exhorting the other three players, upon whom a wooden acquiescence seemed to have fallen.

Shelton turned his back abruptly on Smith, and, crossing the room, went up to young Curly. He was sitting on a bench, smiling to himself those peculiar private smiles like the smiles of a world apart.

'Shall you be staying much longer?' asked Shelton.

Young Curly arose with nervous and apologetic alacrity.

'I'm afraid,' he said, 'there's nobody very interesting to-night.'

'Oh, not at all!' said Shelton; 'on the contrary. Only I've had rather a tiring day, and somehow I don't feel up to the standard here.'

His new acquaintance smiled.

'Oh, really! do you think—that is—'

But he had not time to finish before the clack of the bagatelle balls ceased, and the voice of the little deep-eyed man was heard saying: 'Anybody who wants a book will please put his name down. There will be the usual prayer-meeting on Wednesday next. Will you all go out quietly, please? I am going to turn the lights out.'

One gas-jet vanished, and the remaining jet flared suddenly. By its harder glare the wooden room looked harder too, more rigid, more formally disenchanting. The figures of its occupants began filing through the door. The little man was left alone standing in the centre of the room, with his deep eyes smouldering

upon the dejected backs of the retreating members, and his finger and thumb upraised to the turncock of the metre.

'Do you know this part?' asked young Curly of Shelton, with a smile and a wave of his hand as they emerged once more into the street. 'It's really jolly, you know; one of the darkest bits in London—it is really. If you care, I can take you through an awfully dangerous place where the police never go.' He seemed so anxious for the honour that Shelton was loath to disappoint him. 'I come here pretty often,' he went on, as they ascended some steps into a species of alley which rambled darkly between a blank wall and a row of tumbledown houses.

'Why?' asked Shelton; 'it doesn't smell nice.'

The young man threw up his nose and sniffed, as if eager to add any new scent that might be about to his knowledge of life.

'No, that's one of the reasons, you know,' he said with flickering seriousness; 'one must find out about things. You see, the darkness is jolly, too; anything might happen here. Last week there was a murder; there's always the chance of one.'

Shelton stared, for the charge of morbidness would not lie against this fresh-cheeked stripling.

'There's a splendid drain just here,' his guide resumed; 'the people are dying like flies of typhoid in those three houses;' and, under the first light they met with, he turned his grave, cherubic face with a smile to indicate the houses in question. 'If we were in the East End, I could show you other places quite as good. There's a coffee-stall keeper in one that knows all the thieves in London; he's a splendid type, but,' he

added, looking a little anxiously at Shelton, whom he clearly felt to be in his charge, ‘it mightn’t be safe for you. With me it’s different ; they’re beginning to know me. You see, I’ve got nothing to take.’

‘I’m afraid it can’t be to-night,’ said Shelton ; ‘I must get back to my rooms.’

‘Do you mind if I walk with you ? It’s so jolly now the stars are out.’

His hands again curled in a gesture of apology ; he gave the impression of being about to promenade all night.

‘I shall be delighted,’ said Shelton ; ‘but do you often go to that club, the “Den”?’

His companion raised his hat, and ran his fingers through his hair till it stood on end.

‘No,’ he said ; ‘they’re rather too high-class for me. I like to go where you can see people eat—school treats, or somewhere in the country. It does one good to see them eat. They don’t get enough, you see, as a rule, to make bone ; it all goes out in the brain and the muscles. There are some places in the winter where they give them bread and cocoa ; I like to go to those.’

‘I went once,’ said Shelton, ‘but I felt ashamed for putting my nose in.’

‘Oh, they don’t mind ; most of them are half-dead with cold, you know. You see splendid types ; lots of dipsomaniacs. . . . It’s useful to me,’ went on his acquaintance as they passed a police-station, ‘to walk about at night ; one can take so much more notice. I had a jolly night last week in Hyde Park ; a chance to study human nature there.’

‘And do you find it interesting ?’ asked Shelton.

His companion smiled an apology.

'Awfully,' he replied; 'I saw a fellow pick three pockets.'

'What did you do?'

'I had a jolly talk with him.'

Shelton smiled, and he could not help thinking of the little man with the deep eyes, who made a point of not encouraging sin.

'He was one of the professionals from Notting Hill, you know; told me his life. Never had a chance, of course. The most interesting part was saying I'd seen him pick three pockets—like creeping into a cave, when you can't tell what's inside.'

'Well?'

'He showed me what he'd got—only fivepence-halfpenny.'

'And what became of your friend?' asked Shelton.

'Oh, went off; he had a splendidly low forehead.'

By this time they had reached Shelton's rooms.

'Will you come in,' said the latter, 'and have a drink?'

The youth smiled, blushed, and shook his head.

'No, thank you,' he said; 'I have to walk to White-chapel. I'm living on porridge just now; it's splendid for making bone. I generally live on porridge for a week at the end of the month. It's a splendid diet if you're hard up;' and once more blushing and smiling, he was gone.

Shelton went upstairs and sat down on his bed. The experiences of the day, trivial as they had been, assumed an unexpected importance in his tired brain; the calls he had paid, the 'at home,' the visit to the night club, all seemed of a piece, as though he had spent the whole day in watching a single wheel go

round. He felt a little miserable into the bargain. Sitting there, slowly pulling out the ends of his white tie, while a mirror showed him the crease between his eyes, and the gloss of his shirt-front—sitting there disconsolate, he was visited by a vision of Antonia with her gaze fixed wonderingly upon him. This wonder of hers came as a revelation—just as that morning, when, looking out of his window into the street, he had seen a passer-by stop suddenly as an idea struck him; and it had come upon him with a flash of intense surprise that there were really separate thoughts of his own in that man. He would never know what Antonia really felt and thought. ‘Till I saw her at the station,’ he mused, ‘I didn’t know how much I loved her or how little I knew her;’ and sighing deeply, he got into bed.

CHAPTER XV

POLE TO POLE

THE waiting in London for July to come was daily more unbearable to Shelton, and if it had not been for the visits of Ferrand, who still came to breakfast, he would have deserted the Metropolis. On June 1 the latter presented himself rather later than usual, and announced that, through the services of a friend, he had heard of a position as interpreter to a hotel at Folkestone.

‘If I had money to face the first necessities,’ he said, swiftly turning over a collection of smeared papers with his yellow fingers, as if searching for his own identity, ‘I’d leave to-day. This London blackens my spirit.’

‘Are you certain to get this place?’ asked Shelton.

‘I think so,’ replied the young foreigner; ‘I’ve got some good enough recommendations.’

For the life of him Shelton could not hide the dubious character of the glance he cast at the papers in Ferrand’s hand. A hurt look passed on to the latter’s curly lips beneath the slender line of his nascent moustache.

‘You mean that to have false papers is as bad as theft. No, no; I shall never be a thief—I’ve had too many opportunities,’ said he, both proudly and bitterly.

'That's not in my character. I never do harm to anyone. This'—he fingered the documents—'is not delicate, but it does harm to no one. If you have no money you must have papers; they stand between you and starvation. Society has an excellent eye for the helpless, and it never jumps on the head of people unless they are really without defence.'

Shelton felt abashed, there was such a mixture of shame, pride, injury, and of sheer subtlety in Ferrand's face; it was callous, and yet not callous, like a thing with an inexplicable, remote heart to it, an inexplicable, remote justification. 'You've made me amongst you,' it seemed to say; 'now make the best of me.'

'But there are always the workhouses,' he remarked at last, with hesitation.

'Workhouses!' returned Ferrand sarcastically; 'certainly there are the workhouses—regular palaces. I will tell you one thing: I've never been in places so utterly discouraging as these workhouses of yours; they take your very heart out.'

'I always understood,' said Shelton coldly, 'that our system was better than that of other countries.'

Ferrand leaned over in his chair, with an elbow on his knee, a favourite attitude of his when he was particularly certain of his point.

'Well,' he replied, 'it's always permissible to think well of your own country. But, frankly, I've come out of your palaces here with little strength and no heart at all, and I can tell you why.' His lips lost their bitterness, his eyes became less prominent; over his whole demeanour spread the alert expansion peculiar to him when arriving at psychological deductions from his own

experiences. ‘ You spend your money freely, you have fine buildings and self-respecting officials, but—you lack the spirit of hospitality. And, excuse me, the reason is plain enough: you have such a horror of the needy. You invite us to come, and when we do come you treat us justly enough, but as if we were numbers, criminals, beneath contempt—as if we had inflicted a personal injury on you; and when we get out again, we are naturally degraded.’

Shelton bit his lips.

‘ How much money will you want for your ticket and to make a start?’ he asked.

The nervous gesture which escaped Ferrand at this abrupt change of subject pathetically betrayed how far the most independent thinkers are under the harrow if they have no money in their pockets. He took the note proffered to him.

‘ A thousand thanks,’ said he; ‘ I shall never forget what you have done for me;’ and Shelton could not help feeling that there was true emotion behind the titter with which he took his departure.

He stood some time at the window watching Ferrand adventuring into the world again; then looked back at his own comfortable room, with the infinite number of articles that had accumulated there somehow—the photographs of countless relations and friends, the luxurious old armchairs, and the stock of coloured pipes in the pipe-rack. A thrill of restlessness had passed into him with the farewell clasp of the young foreigner’s damp hand. To wait about in London was intolerable.

He took his hat, and, without heeding where he was going, walked slowly towards the river. It was a

peculiarly clear, bright day, but with a bleak wind that brought up driving showers with surprising suddenness. During one of these showers Shelton found himself opposite the door of No. 3, Little Blank Street. 'I wonder how the little Frenchman is getting on!' he thought. And though on a fine day he would probably have passed by on the other side, he now entered and tapped at the wicket.

No. 3, Little Blank Street had abated no jot of its stone-flagged dreariness, and the same blowsy woman answered his inquiry. Yes, Carolan was always in ; you could never catch him out — seemed afraid to go into the street! To her call the little French barber made his appearance as punctually as if he had been a conjurer's rabbit. His face was yellow, quite alarmingly so.

'Ah! it's you, monsieur!' he said, on recognising Shelton.

'Yes,' said Shelton ; 'and how are you ?'

'It's five days since I came out of hospital,' muttered the Frenchman, tapping his chest ; 'a crisis of this bad atmosphere. I live here, shut up in a box ; it does me harm, being from the South. If there's anything I can do for you, monsieur, it will give me great pleasure.'

'Nothing,' replied Shelton ; 'I was just passing, and thought I should like to hear how you were getting on.'

'Come into the kitchen, monsieur ; there is nobody there. *Brrr ! Il fait un froid étonnant !*'

'What sort of customers have you just now?' asked Shelton, as they passed into the kitchen.

'Always the same clientèle,' replied the little man ; 'not so numerous, of course, it being summer.'

'Couldn't you find anything better than this to do ?'

The barber's crow's-feet were illumined by irony.

'When I first came to London,' said he, 'I secured an engagement at one of your public institutions. I thought my fortune made. Imagine, monsieur, in that sacred place I was obliged to shave at the rate of ten for a penny ! Here, it's true, they don't pay me half the time ; but when I am paid, I am paid. In this climate, and being *poitrinaire*, one doesn't make experiments. I shall finish my days here. Have you seen that young man in whom you were interested ? There's another ! He has spirit, as I had once—*il fait de la philosophie*, as I do—and you will see, monsieur, he'll finish like me. In this world what you want is to have no spirit. Spirit ruins you.'

Shelton looked sideways at the little man with his yellow, half-dead, sardonic face, and the incongruity of the word 'spirit' in his mouth struck him so sharply that he smiled one of those smiles that have more pity in them than tears have.

'Shall we sit down ?' he said, offering the barber his cigarette-case.

'*Merci, monsieur*, it is always a pleasure to smoke a good cigarette. You remember that old actor who gave you one of his Jeremiads ? Well, he's dead. I was the only one at his bedside ; he died drunk, *un vrai drôle*. He was another who had spirit. And you will see, monsieur, that young man in whom you take an interest, he'll die in a hospital, or in some hole or other, or even on the highroad, having closed his eyes once too often some cold night ; and all because he has something in him which will not accept things as they

are, believing always that they ought to be better. *Il n'y a rien de plus tragique !*

'According to you, then,' said Shelton, and the conversation seemed to him all of a sudden to have taken a very personal turn, 'rebellion of any sort is fatal.'

'Ah!' replied the little man, with the alacrity of one whose true pleasure in life is to sit under the awning of a café and talk the world upside down, 'you pose me a great problem. If one makes rebellion, it is always probable that one will do no good to anyone and harm to one's self. The law of the majority regulates that. But I would draw your attention to this'—and he paused to emphasize his remark, as if it were a real discovery, by blowing smoke through his nose—'if you rebel, it is in all likelihood because you are forced by your nature to rebel; this is one of the most certain things in life. In any case, it is necessary to avoid falling between two stools—which is unpardonable,' he ended, with a certain complacence.

Shelton thought he had never seen a man who looked more completely as if he had fallen between two stools, and he had inspiration enough to feel that the little barber's intellectual rebellion and the action logically required by it had no more than a bowing acquaintance.

'By nature,' went on the little Frenchman, 'I am an optimist; it is in consequence of this that I now make my pessimism. I've always had ideals, and now that I see myself cut off from them for ever, I must complain; to complain, monsieur, is very sweet!'

Shelton wondered what his ideals had been, but he had no answer ready; so he nodded, and again proffered the barber his cigarettes, for, like a true Southerner, the latter had thrown the first away, half smoked.

'The greatest pleasure in life,' continued the Frenchman, with a polite bow, 'is to talk a little to a being who is capable of understanding you. At present we have no one here now that that old actor is dead. Ah! there was a man who was rebellion incarnate. He made rebellion as other men make money, *c'était son métier*; when he was no longer capable of an active rebellion, he made it in getting drunk. At the last this was his only way of protesting against Society. An interesting personality, *je le regrette beaucoup*. But, as you see, he died in the greatest distress, without a soul to wave him farewell, because, as you can well understand, monsieur, I don't count myself. He died drunk. *Ah! c'était un homme!*'

Shelton, who during this speech had continued to stare kindly at the little man, was about to reply, when the barber hastily added:

'It's difficult to make an end like that—one has moments of weakness.'

'Yes,' assented Shelton, with emphasis, 'one has indeed.'

The little barber looked at him with discreet cynicism.

'Oh!' he said, 'it's to those who are destitute that such matters are of importance. When one has money, all these things are—'

He shrugged his round shoulders; a smile had lodged amongst his crow's-feet, and he waved his hand as though to get rid of the subject.

A poignant sense of having been exposed as a humbug came over Shelton.

'You think, then,' said he, 'that discontent is confined to the destitute?'

'Monsieur,' replied the little barber, 'a plutocrat

knows too well that if he mixes in that *galère* there's not a dog in the streets more lost than he.'

Shelton rose.

'The rain must be over,' he said. 'I hope you'll soon be better; perhaps you'll accept this in memory of that old actor;' and he slipped a sovereign into the Frenchman's hand.

The latter bowed.

'When you are passing, monsieur,' he said eagerly, 'I shall always be delighted to see you.'

Shelton walked moodily away. '"Not a dog in the streets more lost,"' thought he; 'now what did he mean by that?'

In truth, something of a 'lost dog' feeling had a grip just then of his spirit. He felt as if another month of waiting in London would kill all the savour of his anticipation, would even end by killing his love for Antonia. In the over-excitement of his senses and nerves caused by the strain of waiting, everything assumed too vivid proportions—in other words, everything was touched with exaggeration, like that which differentiates Art from Life, and gives to the former the significance of a truth too strong for everyday use, of a truth unpopular amongst healthy people. Like the bones of a worn face, the spirit underlying things was too near the surface; the meanness and intolerable necessity of hard facts were too apparent. Some craving for help, some instinct, must have driven him into Kensington, for he found himself before his mother's house. Providence seemed bent on flinging him from pole to pole.

Mrs. Shelton was in town, and though it was the first of June sat warming her feet before a fire; her face, with its

pleasant colour, was crow's-footed like the little barber's, but from optimism, and not rebellion. She smiled when she saw Shelton, and the wrinkles round her affectionate eyes twinkled with vitality.

'Well, my dear boy,' she said, 'it's lovely to see you. And how is that sweet girl?'

'Very well, thank you,' replied Shelton.

'She must be *such* a dear!'

'Mother,' stammered Shelton, 'I must give it up.'

'Give it up? My dear Dick, give what up? You look quite worried. Come and sit down, and let's have a cosy chat. Cheer up!' and Mrs. Shelton, with her head a little on one side, gazed at her son with imperative sympathy.

'Mother,' said Shelton, who, confronted by her optimism, had never since his period of probation began felt so profoundly dejected, 'I can't go on waiting like this.'

'But, my dear boy, what *is* the matter?'

'Everything is all wrong!' burst out Shelton.

'Wrong?' cried Mrs. Shelton. 'Come, tell me all about it!'

But Shelton shook his head.

'You surely haven't had a quarrel—'

Mrs. Shelton stopped, for the question seemed to her vulgar.

'No,' said Shelton, and his answer sounded like a groan.

'You know, my dear old Dick,' murmured his mother insinuatingly, 'it seems a little mad.'

'I know it seems mad.'

'Come!' said Mrs. Shelton, taking his hand between her own; 'you never used to be like this.'

'No,' said Shelton, with a laugh; 'I never used to be like this.'

Mrs. Shelton snuggled herself in her fine shawl.

'Oh,' she said, with her readiest sympathy, 'I know exactly how you feel!'

Shelton rested his head on his hands and stared into the fire, which played and bubbled like his mother's face.

'But you're so fond of each other,' she began again, a humorous grimace marring for a moment the perfection of her sympathy. 'Such a sweet girl!'

'You don't understand,' muttered Shelton gloomily; 'it's not her—it's nothing—it's—'

Mrs. Shelton again seized his hand, and this time pressed it to her soft, warm cheek, that had lost the elasticity of youth.

'Oh!' she cried; 'I quite understand. I know what you're feeling.' But Shelton saw from the fixed beam of her eyes that she had not an inkling. To do him justice, he was not mad enough to attempt an explanation. Again the humorous grimace appeared on his mother's face. 'It would be so lovely,' she sighed, 'if you could wake up to-morrow and think differently. If I were you, my dear boy, I would go and have a splendid long walk and a Turkish bath; and then I would just write her a long letter, and tell her all about it, and you'll see how beautifully it'll all come straight;' and in the enthusiasm of her advice Mrs. Shelton actually rose from her sofa, and, with a faint stretch of her tiny figure, which was still so young, clasped her hands together, and said: 'Now *do*, that's a dear old Dick! You'll just see how lovely it'll all be!' Shelton smiled the ghost of a smile; he had not

the heart to deny this vision. ‘And give her my warmest love,’ cried his mother, ‘and tell her I’m longing for the wedding. Come, now, my dear boy, promise me that’s what you’ll do.’

‘I’ll think about it,’ said Shelton.

Mrs. Shelton had taken up her stand with one foot on the fender, in spite of her sciatica.

‘Cheer up!’ she said suddenly; and her eyes beamed as if she were intoxicated by her own sympathy.

Certainly she was a wonderful woman. But the uncomplicated optimism that carried her through good and ill had not descended to her son.

From pole to pole he had been thrown that day, from the French barber, whose intellect accepted nothing without carping, and whose little fingers barely stirred to save himself from extinction, to his own mother, whose intellect accepted anything presented with sufficient glow, but who, until she died, would never be under the harrow. Poor Shelton! there was too much of them both in him. When he reached his rooms, he took a resolution.

‘I can’t wait about in London any longer’ (he wrote to Antonia), ‘so I am going down to Bideford to start on a walking tour. I shall work gradually east towards Oxford, and stay there till I may come to Holm Oaks. Of course, I shall send you my address every day, so *do* write as usual.’

He collected all the photographs he had of her—mostly amateur groups, taken by Mrs. Dennant—and packed them carefully in the breast-pocket of his shooting-jacket. He was especially fond of one in which she was leaning against the knees of her little

brother, who was perched on the top of a wall. In that photograph of her, with half-closed eyes, round throat, and softly tilted chin, there was something cool and watchful, as if she were protecting the ragamuffin above her head. This he kept apart from the others to be looked at daily, as a man says his prayers.

PART II
THE COUNTRY

CHAPTER XVI

THE INDIAN CIVILIAN

SHELTON fulfilled his intention of leaving London, and at noon one morning about a week later found himself looking at the walls of Princetown Prison.

He had often seen this lugubrious stone cage before. But the fantastic magic of his early morning walk across Dartmoor in a golden haze that had burned itself slowly away till the blue of the sky was as clear and fresh as the water of the streams, the sight of the tors with their pagan forms, and the notes of the late cuckoos, had produced in him a delight that received a rude shock from the utter dreariness of the building. He left the street, and, entering the fosse path, began making a circuit, scanning the walls with a kind of morbid fascination.

This, then, was the system by which human beings enforced on each other the will of the majority, and it was suddenly borne in upon him that all the ideas and maxims which the inhabitants of his Christian country believed themselves to be daily fulfilling were stultified in every cell of the social honeycomb. Such teachings as ‘He that is without sin amongst you’ had been rejected as utterly unpractical by peers, judges, bishops, statesmen, merchants, and husbands—in fact, by every truly Christian person in the country.

'Yes,' thought Shelton, as if he had made a discovery, 'the more Christian the nation, the less it has to do with spirit.'

Society was an immense organization for giving nothing for nothing, very little for sixpence, and only fear forced it to give anything at all!

He took a seat on a wall, and began to watch a warder who was slowly paring a last year's apple with a long-bladed knife. The expression of his face, the way he stood with his solid legs apart, his head poked forward, and the lower jaw thrust out as if threatening the apple, all seemed to make him a perfect pillar of Society. He remained undisturbed under Shelton's scrutiny, coldly watching the rind coil down below the apple, quivering as the knife moved, until in a springing spiral it fell on the path and collapsed like a toy rattlesnake. He then took a bite; his teeth were jagged, and he had an immense mouth. It was somehow obvious that he considered himself superior to the criminals of whom he was in charge. Shelton frowned, got slowly down from the wall, and proceeded on his way.

A very little way further down the hill he stopped again to watch a group of convicts in a field, engaged in what looked like a slow and mournful cotillon, while behind the hedges on every side warders paraded with guns, as if licensed to commit murder. Just such a sight, substituting spears, could have been seen in the days of the Romans.

While he thus stood looking at them, a man coming rapidly from the direction of Princetown stopped beside him, and inquired the distance to Exeter. His round visage, and long, brown eyes, sliding about under

their brows, his cropped hair and short neck, seemed strangely familiar to Shelton.

'Why,' he said, 'surely your name is Crocker?'

'By Jove! it's the Bird!' cried the traveller, putting out his hand. 'I haven't seen you since I went down.'

Shelton returned his handgrip. Crocker had occupied the rooms above him at college, and had frequently kept him awake half the night by playing on the hautboy.

'Where have you sprung from?' he asked, with a sudden return of the old spirit of comradeship.

'India. I've got my long leave. I say, are you going this way? Let's go together.'

Shelton smiled quietly as his companion kept increasing his stride. It was so characteristic.

'Where on earth are you going to at this pace?' he asked.

'London,' answered Crocker.

'Oh! only as far as London?'

'I've set myself to do it in a week,' replied the Indian civilian.

'In a week! Are you in training?'

'No.'

'You'll kill yourself.'

Crocker replied to the remark with a chuckle.

A desire to be ironical had sprung up within Shelton. He had always felt like that in the presence of Crocker, with his simple absent-mindedness, his aspirations chuckles, slyness, his deeds, and secret humour. 'Yes,' he reflected, with an odd admiration, 'he was always a little mad.' But he also remembered that irony had always been wasted on him. His com-

panion had begun unconsciously to walk him down, and Shelton noticed with alarm the expression of that sliding eye ; there was something lofty in it, a sort of stubborn inspiration. ‘ Tchk, tchk ! He’s still an idealist !’ and at this thought he felt vaguely disturbed. ‘ Well,’ he inquired at last, ‘ what sort of a time have you had in India ?’

‘ Oh,’ said the Indian civilian absently, ‘ I’ve had the plague.’

‘ Had the plague ! Good God !’

Crocker smiled, and added in his grave matter-of-fact way :

‘ Caught it on famine duty.’

‘ I see,’ said Shelton reflectively ; ‘ plague and famine ! I suppose you fellows really think you’re doing good out there ?’

His companion looked at him with surprise, and modestly answered :

‘ We get very good screws.’

‘ That’s the great thing,’ replied Shelton.

After a moment’s silence, however, Crocker, looking straight in front of him, inquired :

‘ Don’t you think we *are* doing good ?’

‘ I’m not an authority ; but, as a matter of fact, I don’t.’

Crocker seemed disconcerted ; he slackened his pace.

‘ Why ?’ he bluntly asked.

Shelton was not anxious to air his views, so he said nothing.

His friend repeated his question :

‘ Why don’t you think we’re doing good in India ?’

‘ Well,’ said Shelton gruffly, ‘ what *I* should like to

know is, how can progress be imposed on nations from outside ?'

The Indian civilian proceeded some distance, then, glancing at Shelton in an affectionate, dubious way, he replied :

' You haven't changed a bit, old chap.'

' No, no,' replied Shelton irritably, for Crocker was walking faster than ever ; ' you're not going to get out of it that way. Give me a single example of a nation, or an individual, for the matter of that, who's ever done any good without having worked up to it from within.'

Crocker grunted, and muttered something about ' evils.'

' That's it,' ejaculated Shelton, who had suddenly become loquacious ; ' we take peoples entirely different from our own, and stop their natural development by substituting a civilization grown for our own use. Suppose, looking at a tropical fern in a hothouse, you were to say : " This heat's unhealthy for me ; therefore it must be bad for the fern. I'll take it up and plant it outside in the fresh air." '

' Do you know that means giving up India ?' said the Indian civilian shrewdly.

' I don't say that ; but to talk about doing *good* to India is—h'm !'

Crocker knitted his brows ; there was something pathetic in his anxiety. Shelton went on elaborating his argument.

' Come, now ! Should we go on administering India if it were a dead loss to us ? No. Well, to talk about administering the country for the purpose of pocketing money is cynical, and there's generally some truth in cynicism ; but to talk about the administration of a

country by which we profit, as if it were a great and good thing, is cant. I hit you in the wind for the benefit of myself—all right: law of Nature; but to say it does you good at the same time is beyond me.'

'No, no,' returned Crocker, still grave and anxious; 'you can't persuade me that we're not doing good.'

'Wait a bit,' said Shelton, on his mettle: 'The thing is a question of horizons; you look at it from too close. Put the horizon further back. You hit India in the wind, and say it's virtuous. Well, now let's see what happens. Either the wind never comes back, and India gasps to an untimely death, or the wind does come back, and in the pant of reaction your blow—that's to say your labour—is lost, I mean morally lost—labour that you might have spent where it wouldn't have been lost.'

'Aren't you an Imperialist?' asked Crocker, genuinely surprised.

'I may be, but I keep my mouth shut about the benefits we're conferring on other people.'

'Then you can't believe in justice or right?'

'What on earth have *our* ideas of justice or right got to do with India?'

'If I thought as you do,' sighed Crocker, almost running, 'I should be all adrift.'

'Quite so,' retorted Shelton. 'We always think our standards of right and wrong best for the whole world. It's a capital belief for us. Read the speeches of our public men. Doesn't it strike you as amazing how sure they are of being in the right? It's so charming to benefit yourself and others at the same time, though, when you come to think of it, one man's meat is usually another man's poison. Look at Nature. But there it

is again ; in England we never look at Nature—there's no necessity for it. Our National point of view fills our pockets, which is all that matters.'

'I say, old chap, that's awfully bitter,' remonstrated Crocker, with a sort of wondering sadness.

'It's enough to make anyone bitter the way we Pharisees wax fat, and at the same time give ourselves the airs of a moral balloon. You must stick a pin in sometimes, for the pleasure of hearing the gas escape.' Shelton was surprised at his own vehemence, and for some strange reason thought of Antonia, who was surely not connected with Pharisiasm.

His companion strode on, and Shelton felt sorry for the signs of disturbance on his visage.

'To fill your pockets,' said Crocker at last, 'isn't the main thing. One has just got to *do* things without thinking of anything else.'

'Do you ever see the other side to any question?' asked Shelton. 'I suppose not. You always begin to act before you stop thinking, don't you?'

Crocker grinned, and hit him a playful blow in the side.

'He's a Pharisee, too,' thought Shelton, 'without a speck of the Pharisee's pride. Queer thing that!'

After walking some distance, as if thinking deeply, Crocker chuckled out with a sly look :

'You're not consistent ; you ought to be in favour of giving up India, you know.'

Shelton did not reply for a minute, but smiled uneasily.

'Why shouldn't we fill our pockets?' he remarked. 'I only object to the humbug we talk.'

The Indian civilian put his hand shyly through Shelton's arm.

'If I thought like you,' he said, 'I couldn't stay another day in India.'

Shelton made no reply.

The wind had now begun to drop, and something of the morning's magic was stealing again over the moor. They were nearing the outskirt fields of cultivation. It was past five when they dropped from the level of the tors into the sunny hollow of Monkland.

'They say,' said Crocker, reading a paragraph from a crimson guide-book he was continually drawing from his pocket—'they say this place occupies a position of unique isolation.'

The two travellers, in tranquil solitude, took their seats under an old yew-tree on the village green. The smoke of their pipes, the sleepy air, the warmth from the baked ground, the constant hum, made Shelton drowsy.

'Do you remember,' his companion asked suddenly, 'those "jaws" you used to have with Busgate and old Halidome in my rooms on Sunday evenings? How is old Halidome?'

'Married,' replied Shelton.

Crocker sighed. 'And are *you*?' he asked, with a glance at once shrewd and bashful.

'Not yet,' said Shelton grimly; 'but I'm—engaged.'

Crocker took hold of his arm above the elbow, squeezed it, and grunted. Shelton had not yet received congratulations that pleased him more; there was the spice of envy in them.

'I should like to get married while I'm at home,' said the Indian civilian after a lengthy pause. His legs were stretched apart, throwing shadows on the green, his hands deep thrust into his pockets, his head a little to one side. An absent-minded smile played around his mouth.

The sun sank behind a tor, but the warmth still sweated out of the village green, and the sweet-briar on a cottage behind bathed them with its spicy perfume. From the lane at the bottom figures passed now and then, lounged across, stared at the strangers on the bench, and, gossiping amongst themselves, vanished into the row of cottages that headed the incline. The church clock struck seven, and round the now shadowless yew-tree a cockchafer or some heavy insect commenced a series of booming rushes. All was marvelously sane and slumbrous. Everything—the soft air, the soft drawl, the shapes and murmurs, the rising smell of wood-smoke from fresh kindled fires—was full of the spirit of security and of home. The outside world was barred off. Typical of some island nation was this nest of refuge—complacency was born and bred there; men grew quietly tall, fattened, and without fuss dropped off their perches; ideals flourished blandly, as sunflowers flourish in the sun, and, when the sun goes in, fall asleep.

Crocker's cap slipped off; he was nodding, and Shelton looked at him. From one of a thousand such homes he had issued; to one of a thousand such homes he would find his way at last, untouched by his struggles against famines or plagues, uninfected in any essential jot of his fibre, his prejudices, or his principles, by strange peoples, new conditions, odd feelings, or queer points of view!

The chafer buzzed against the Indian civilian's sleeve with a sounding smack, gathered way again slowly, and boomed off. He roused himself, and, turning his face, shy and amiable, jogged Shelton's arm.

'What are you thinking about, Bird?' he asked.

CHAPTER XVII

A PARSON

SHELTON continued to travel with the Indian civilian, and on Wednesday night, four days after joining company, they arrived cold and wet at the village of Dowdenham. All day long the road had lain through pastureland, where the very hedges breathed fertility, the very trees opulence. Once or twice they had broken its monotony by a stretch along the towing-path of a canal, which, choked with water-lily plants and the green of disuse, brooded sluggishly beside the meadows. Nature, in one of her ironical moods, had chosen to cast a gray, iron-hard cloak over all the country's trimly bland luxuriance. From dawn till the moment when darkness fell there had been no movement in the remote, steely sky; a cold wind ruffled across the hedge-tops, and sent shivers through the early feathering on the stems of the elms. The cattle, dappled, pied, bay, or white, continued their grazing with an air of grumbling at their birthright. In a meadow close to the canal the travellers saw five magpies, and about five o'clock the rain began, a steady, coldly-sneering rain, which Crocker, looking at the sky and rubbing his round chin the wrong way, declared was going to be over directly. But it was *not*

over directly, and as they got more and more drenched, Shelton became more and more disgusted. He was tired, and it annoyed him intensely that his companion, who was tired also, should grow more and more cheerful. His reflections kept harping on Ferrand. ‘This,’ thought he, ‘must be something like what he described to me, tramping on and on when you’re wet and dead-beat, until you can cadge up a supper and a bed.’ And he ploughed sullenly through the mud with sinister glances at Crocker, who had skinned one heel and was limping horribly. It suddenly came home to him that life for three-quarters of the world meant physical exhaustion for every day in the year without any possibility of escape, and that as soon as, for some cause beyond their control, they failed to exhaust themselves, they became paupers, or starved. ‘And then we, who don’t know the meaning of the word exhaustion, at once call them “idle scamps,”’ he said aloud.

It was past nine and pitch dark when they reached Dowdenham. The street seemed to yield no accommodation, and while debating where to look for an inn they passed the church, with its dim, square tower, and next to it a house which was manifestly the parsonage.

‘Suppose,’ said the Indian civilian, leaning his arms dreamily on the gate, ‘we ask him where to go for the night;’ and without waiting for Shelton’s answer, he flung open the gate and rang the bell.

The door was opened by the parson himself, a bloodless, clean-shaven man, whose hollow cheeks and bony hands suggested a perpetual struggle. Ascetically benevolent were his gray eyes as he invited them out

of the rain. A smile, like the ghost of vitality, strayed in and out of the curves of his thin lips.

'What can I do for you?' he asked. 'Inn? Yes, there's the Blue Chequers, but I'm afraid you'll find it shut. They're early people, I'm glad to say;' and his eyes seemed to muse over the proper fold for these damp sheep. 'Are you Oxford men, by any chance?' he asked, as if that might throw some light upon the matter. 'Of Mary's? Really! I'm of St. Saul's myself. Ladyman—Billington Ladyman; you might remember my youngest brother. I could give you a room here if you could manage without sheets. My housekeeper has two days' holiday, and she's foolishly taken the keys.'

Shelton accepted gladly, feeling that the superior intonation in the parson's voice was merely that which is necessary to his calling, and not in the least intended for patronage.

'You're hungry, I expect, after your tramp. I'm very much afraid there's—er—nothing in the house, but I could boil you some water; hot lemonade is better than nothing.'

Conducting them to the kitchen, he made a fire with his bony hands, and put on a kettle; and leaving them to take off their soaking clothes, he returned shortly with two ancient, greenish-black coats, some carpet slippers, and a couple of blankets. Wrapped in these, and carrying their glasses, the travellers followed him to the study, where, by the light of a doubtful lamp, he seemed, from the books scattered about the table, to have been writing his sermon.

'We're giving you a lot of trouble,' said Shelton; 'it's awfully good of you.'

'Not at all,' responded the parson; 'I'm only sorry the house is so empty.'

It was a truly dismal contrast to the fatness of the land they had been passing through all day, and what was really pathetic was the owner's voice issuing, a wraith of complacency, from bloodless lips that looked as if they had an insufficiency to eat. Yes; it was most peculiar, that voice of his, which seemed to indicate an intimate acquaintanceship with everything fat and fine, to convey a sovereign contempt for the vulgar need of money, while all the time his eyes—those watery, ascetic eyes—as plain as speech they said: 'Oh, to know what it must be like to have a pound or two to spare just once in a way!'

Everything in the room had been bought for cheapness; luxuries there were none, and not enough necessities. It was bleak, it was bare; the ceiling was cracked and the wall-paper discoloured, and those books—shining, prim books, with fat backs and arms stamped upon them—almost glared in the surrounding barrenness.

'My predecessor,' said the parson, with pathetic superiority, 'played rather havoc with the house. The poor fellow had a dreadful struggle, I'm told. You can, unfortunately, expect nothing else in these days, when livings have come down so terribly in value! He was a married man with a large family!'

Crocker, who had drunk his steaming lemonade at a draught, was smiling and already nodding in his chair; with a greenish-black garment buttoned closely below his round visage, his long legs rolled in a blanket, and stretched out towards the feeble flame of the newly-lighted fire, he presented an appearance frightening in

its incongruity. Shelton, on the other hand, had ceased to feel tired ; the strangeness of his surroundings stimulated an unusual activity in his brain ; he kept stealing glances at the unspeakable scantiness around him, and the room, the parson, the furniture, the very fire, all gave him the feeling that is produced by the sight of a pair of legs that have outgrown their trousers. He did not know what to say. To express sympathy would have been sheer bad taste ; besides, there was something underlying the leanness of his host's figure, something superior and academic, which defied sympathy. Yet the parson's glance had the faculty of irritating his nerves, and it was really pure nervousness which made him say :

‘ Ah ! why *do* they have such large families ? ’

A faint red mounted into the parson's cheeks, and its appearance there was startling. Crocker chuckled, as a sleepy man chuckles who has not heard a remark, but feels bound to show that he is awake.

‘ It’s very unfortunate,’ murmured the parson, ‘ certainly, in many cases.’

In all probability Shelton would have changed the subject, but at this moment the wretched Crocker snored. Most men in his condition would have temporized with their somnolence, but he, being a man of action, had simply fallen asleep.

‘ It seems to me,’ said Shelton hurriedly, as he saw the parson’s eyebrows rising at the sound, ‘ almost what you might call wrong.’

‘ Dear me !’ replied the parson, reverting to Shelton ; ‘ but how can it be wrong ? ’

‘ Oh, of course, I don’t know,’ said Shelton, feeling that he must justify his unfortunate remark somehow,

and floundering hopelessly, ‘only one knows such a lot of cases—clergymen’s families ; I’ve got two uncles myself—’

A new expression had gathered on the parson’s face ; his mouth tightened, so that the chin slightly receded. ‘Why, he’s awfully like a mule !’ thought Shelton. His eyes, too, had grown harder, grayer, more parrotty ; his lips were drawn in at the corners. The authority which looked out of his face had an ill effect on his guest.

The parson smiled.

‘Perhaps you and I,’ he answered, ‘would not understand each other on such matters.’

Shelton felt rather ashamed.

‘I should like to ask you a question in turn, however,’ continued the parson, as if desirous of meeting Shelton on his somewhat low ground : ‘How do you justify marriage if it is not to follow the edicts of nature ?’

‘I can only tell what I feel personally.’

‘My dear sir, you forget that a woman’s chief delight is in her motherhood.’

‘I should have thought it a pleasure likely to pall with repetition. Motherhood is motherhood, whether of one or of a dozen.’

‘I’m afraid,’ replied the parson, with a certain impatience, though still keeping on Shelton’s low ground, ‘that your theories are not calculated to populate the world.’

‘Have you ever lived in London ?’ asked Shelton. ‘It always makes me doubt whether we have any right to have children at all.’

‘But surely,’ queried the parson with wonderful restraint, though the joints of his fingers cracked

with the grip he had upon his chair, ‘you’re leaving out the duty towards the country ; the national growth is paramount !’

‘There are two ways of looking at that. It depends on what you want your country to become.’

‘I didn’t know,’ said the parson—and a certain fanaticism had crept into his smile—‘that there was any doubt on such a subject.’

The more Shelton felt that he was being commanded, the more controversial he became—quite apart from the merits of the subject, to which he had hardly given a thought in his life.

‘I dare say I’m wrong,’ he said, fastening his eyes on the stripes in the blanket in which his legs were wrapped ; ‘but it seems to me at least an open question whether it’s better for the country to be so well populated as to be absolutely incapable of supporting itself.’

‘Surely,’ said the parson, whose face had regained its pallor, ‘you’re not a Little Englander ?’

The phrase had a mysterious effect on Shelton, who felt uneasy and insulted. In spite of a secret impulse to try and discover what he really was, he hastened to answer :

‘Of course not !’

The parson, with the magnanimity of the victorious, instantly followed up his triumph, and, shifting the discussion from Shelton’s ground to his own, gravely said :

‘Surely you must see that your theory is founded in immorality. It is, if I may say so, extravagant, even wicked.’

But Shelton, suffering from the irritation aroused by a sense of his own dishonesty, replied with some heat :

‘Why not say at once “hysterical and unhealthy”? Any opinion which goes contrary to that of the majority is always called so, I believe.’

‘Well,’ repeated the parson, whose eyes and mouth seemed trying to bind Shelton to his will, ‘I must say your ideas *do* seem to me both extravagant and unhealthy. The propagation of children is the chief object of marriage.’

Shelton bowed, and his host was too excited to smile at the ludicrous figure he thereby cut.

‘We live in very dangerous times,’ continued the parson, ‘and it grieves me when a man of your standing and education subscribes to these notions.’

‘Excuse me, I can’t help thinking it unreasonable for people whom the shoe doesn’t pinch to make a rule of morality and thrust it on those whom it does.’

The irony of his calling the parson ‘a man whom the shoe doesn’t pinch’ quite escaped him.

‘The rule was never *made*,’ said the parson; ‘it was given us.’

‘Oh!’ said Shelton, ‘I beg your pardon.’ He felt so intensely annoyed that he was in danger of forgetting the delicate position he was in. ‘He wants to ram his notions down my throat,’ he thought, staring; and it seemed to him that the parson’s face had grown still more like a mule’s, his accent more superior, the glance of his eyes more compelling. To be right in this argument seemed now of the greatest importance, whereas, in truth, it was of no importance at all. What, however, *was* of importance was the fact that neither could possibly have agreed with the other in anything.

Crocker suddenly ceased to snore ; his head had fallen so low on his chest that the very snores were strangled, and a peculiar whistling took their place. Both Shelton and the parson looked at him, and both seemed to become conscious of their heat.

'Your friend seems very tired,' said the parson, putting his hand to his brow.

Shelton forgot his annoyance, for his host again seemed to him pathetic, with his baggy garments, hollow cheeks, and the slightly red nose that sometimes comes from not drinking enough. What a kind fellow he was !

The kind fellow rose, and putting his hands in his pockets, placed himself with his back to the fast-blackening fire. Whole centuries of authority stood behind him. It was but an accident that the mantelpiece was chipped and rusty, the fire-irons bent and worn, his linen frayed at the cuffs.

'I have no wish to be dictatorial,' said he. 'Where it seems to me that you are wholly in the wrong is, that your ideas foster in women those lax views of the family life that are so prevalent in Society nowadays.'

The image of Antonia with her gray eyes, the touch of freckling on her pink and white skin, the fair hair severely gathered back, sprang before Shelton, and the use of the word 'lax' seemed ridiculous. And then there were the women he was accustomed to see dragging about the streets of London with two or three children, women staggering under the weight of babies they were unable to leave, women going to work with babies still unborn, and anæmic-looking women and moneyless mothers in his own class, with twelve or

fourteen children, in fact, all the victims of the sanctity of marriage, and again he felt the word 'lax' to be ridiculous. But he had, no doubt, a private sympathy with the word 'lax'—a temperamental objection to authority.

'We are not put into the world to exercise our'—Shelton insanely hoped he was going to say 'wits'—'wanton wills,' remarked the parson tyrannically.

Shelton came out of his reverie.

'It may have been all right for the last generation; the country is more crowded now. I can't see why we shouldn't decide for ourselves.'

'Such a view of morality,' said the parson, for some reason looking down at Crocker with a ghostly smile, 'is unintelligible to me.'

The Indian civilian continued to whistle.

'I tell you what I hate,' said Shelton, 'and that's the way men decide what women are to bear, and then call them hysterical, immoral, decadent, what you like, if they don't fall in with their views.'

'Mr. Shelton,' said the parson, 'I think you may safely leave it in the hands of God.'

Shelton was silent. But his host was unable to follow his own advice.

'The questions of morality,' he said promptly, 'have always lain through God in the hands of men, not of women. We are the more reasonable sex.'

'I don't know about that,' was Shelton's stubborn reply; 'we're the greater humbugs, if that's the same thing.'

'This is too bad,' exclaimed the parson with some heat.

'I'm sorry, sir; but how can you expect women nowa-

days to have the same views as our grandmothers? We men, by our commercial enterprise, have brought about a different state of affairs, and yet, for the sake of our own comfort, we try to keep women where they were. It's always those fellows who are most keen about their own comfort'—and again in his heat the sarcasm of using the word 'comfort' in that room was lost on him—'who are so ready to accuse women of deserting the old morality.'

The parson's lips quivered with impatient irony.

'Old morality! new morality!' he said. 'These are strange words.'

'Forgive me,' explained Shelton; 'we're talking of working morality, I imagine. There's not a man in a million fit to talk about true morality.'

The eyes of his host contracted.

'I think,' he said—and his voice sounded more precious, as if he had pinched it in the endeavour to impress his listener—'that any well-educated man who honestly tries to serve his God has the right humbly—I say humbly—to speak of morality.'

Shelton smiled. He was on the point of saying something bitter, but checked himself. 'Here am I,' thought he, 'trying to get the last word, like any old woman.'

At this moment a faint, piteous mewing was heard through the window, and the parson went towards the door.

'Excuse me a moment; I'm afraid that's one of my cats out in the wet.' He returned a minute later with a very wet cat in his arms. 'They *will* get out,' he said to Shelton, with a vague, soft smile on his thin face, suffused with the exertion of stooping.

Absent-mindedly he stroked the dripping cat the wrong way, while a drop of wet ran off his nose. 'Poor pussy, poor pussy!' he kept saying. The cut-and-dried sound of that 'Poor pussy, poor pussy!' like nothing human in its cracked superiority, the softness of that smile, like the smile of humanity itself, haunted Shelton till he fell asleep.

CHAPTER XVIII

ACADEMIC

THE last sunlight was playing on the roofs of the 'High' when the travellers entered that street, so grave and holy to Oxford men. The spirit hovering over the spires was as different from its concretions in cap and gown on the pavement as the spirit of Christ from Church dogmas.

'Shall we go into Grinnings?' asked Shelton, as they passed the club.

Each looked down at his clothes, for two elegant young men in straw hats and flannel suits were just coming out.

'You go,' said Crocker, with a smirk.

Shelton shook his head. Never before had he felt such a love for the old city. It was gone now out of his life, and everything about it seemed good and fine; even its precious air of exclusiveness was not ignoble. Clothed in the calm of history, the golden web of glorious tradition, radiant with the alchemy of memories, it bewitched him like the scent of a mistress's dress. They stopped to idle at the entrance of a college, and glance in at the cool gray patch of stone beyond, and the single scarlet splash of a window flower-box—a secluded, mysteriously calm glimpse, in narrow per-

spective, of the sacred past. Pale and trencher-capped, a youth with a pimply face and random nose, grabbing his torn-off gown to his hip, was gazing at the notice-board. The college porter, a large man with a fresh face and small mouth, stood at the door of his lodge in an attitude deferential and frank; the image of confidential routine, he looked like one engaged to give an air of decorum to multitudes of peccadilloes. His blue eyes rested inquiringly on the travellers. ‘I don’t know you, sirs, but I shall be glad to hear any observations you may have to make,’ they seemed to say.

Against the wall reposed a bicycle with a tennis-racquet buckled to its handle. A bull-dog bitch, straining on a strap, and working her queer snout from side to side, snuffled continually; the great iron-studded door to which she was fastened remained immovable, a symbol of permanency. Into the mould, through this narrow mouth, human metal had been poured for centuries—poured, moulded, and given back.

‘Come along,’ said Shelton.

They entered the Bishop’s Head, and dined in the room where he had given his celebrated Derby dinner to four-and-twenty youths of the best breeding; opposite him was the picture of a racehorse that the wineglass, thrown by Toby Fossdyke, had missed when it hit the waiter; and there, serving Crocker with anchovy sauce, was the same waiter. When he had dined, Shelton experienced something of the old desire to rise from the table with difficulty; the old necessity to patrol the streets with his arm hooked in some other arm; the old eagerness to do something daring, heroic, and unlawful; the old sense that he belonged to the best

set, in the best college, in the best country in the best world. The streets, mellow and gravely unexpected, seemed to applaud this after-dinner stroll; and the entrance quadrangle of his old college—spaciously majestic, monastically modern, for years the heart of his universe, the focus of all that had gone before it in his life, and casting the shadow of its gray, exclusive walls over all that had come after—brought him a sensation of rest from conflict, an intoxicating belief in his own important security. Even the sight of the garden-gate, whose lofty spikes he had so often decorated with empty soda-water bottles, failed to disturb him. He had but a vague sense of remorse when they passed a staircase down which he had committed the indelicacy of flinging a leg of lamb after some other men's tutor, who had been foolish enough to suppose that two in the morning was not a time to eat oysters. Perched up high on the next staircase were the rooms in which he had crammed for his degree, upon the system by which the scholar assimilates the dry bones of his coach's knowledge, boils over at the moment of examination, and is an extinct volcano for ever afterwards. The face of that gentleman recurred to him, a man with thrusting eyes, who reeled off knowledge all the week like a demoniacal machine, and on Saturday evening disappeared to London.

They passed their tutor's staircase.

'I wonder if little Turl would remember us?' said Crocker; 'I should like to see him. Shall we go and look him up?'

'Little Turl?' said Shelton dreamily.

He was too happy to dissent, and, mounting, they knocked on a solid door.

'Come in,' said a somnolent voice.

A little fat man, with a pink face and very large ears, was sitting in a magnificent chair, as if he had been grown there. He got up at once with sleepy alarm.

'What do you want?' he asked, blinking.

'Don't you know me, sir?' said the Indian civilian.

'God bless me! Crocker, isn't it? I didn't recognise you with a beard.'

Crocker, who had not been shaved since starting on his travels, passed his hand over his chin, and chuckled feebly.

'You remember Shelton, sir?' he said.

'Shelton? Oh yes! How do you do, Shelton? Sit down; take a cigar;' and the little gentleman again took his seat in the large chair, and, crossing his fat little legs, looked from one to the other with drowsy interest, as who should say: 'Now, after all, you know, why the deuce come and wake me up like this?'

Shelton and Crocker took two other large chairs, and they, too, looked at each other, as if thinking: 'Yes; why the deuce *did* we come and wake him up?' Shelton, who could not answer this question, took silent refuge in the cigar; his eyes roamed over the panelled walls covered with reproductions of the most celebrated Greek and Roman remains; the thick, soft carpet on the floor was grateful to his tired feet; the backs of innumerable books gleamed richly in the light of the oil lamps; the sleepy culture and perfumed smoke stole upon his senses; he but vaguely comprehended Crocker's amiable and jerky attempts at conversation, but vaguely comprehended the replies of his host, whose face, in the thickening atmosphere, blinking

behind the bowl of a huge meerschaum, assumed to his nodding faculties some queer likeness to a moon. He would, indeed, have been asleep in another minute had not the door opened, and a tall, middle-aged creature, whose eyes were large and brown, whose face was pale and ironical, entered with disjointed, manly strides.

‘Oh!’ he said, looking round with his chin a little in the air and a half-unseeing glance, ‘am I in the way, Turl?’

The little host did not move, but, blinking more than ever, murmured :

‘Not at all, Berryman—not at all; take a pew!’

The individual called Berryman sat down on the arm of a chair, swung one of his long legs, and, smiling, gazed now at the wall, now at the carpet, with those fine eyes.

Shelton had a faint recollection of him as one of the dons in his time, but the sense of detachment conveyed by wine and good cigars was so strong that he offered no recognition beyond a bow, and remained within the fortress of his chair, once more, however, wide awake.

‘Is there still balm in Gilead?’ said the new-comer, with his eyes on the whist table. ‘Trimmer and Washer were coming round;’ and almost before the satire which was too habitual to have any connection with his heart, but seemed to belong exclusively to his head, had died off his lips, the door opened to admit the two gentlemen in question. Of about the same height, but very different in appearance, they bowed slightly; their manner was faintly jocular, faintly supercilious, as if they tolerated the universe. The one whose name was Trimmer had patches of red on his large cheek-bones, and below

them a bluish tint on his cheeks, and rather full lips; some quite indescribable resemblance to a spider dominated his face. Washer, who was thin and pale, came in with a long stride and a jeering smile.

The little fat host moved the hand that held the meerschaum.

'Crocker, Shelton,' he said, vaguely introducing them to the last arrivals.

An awkward silence prevailed. Shelton made a desperate appeal to the more cultured portion of his wits; but so strong upon him was the sense that nothing would be treated seriously that his faculties became paralyzed, and he remained silent, staring bashfully at the glowing tip of his cigar. The strange notion possessed him that it was unfair, actually unfair, to have intruded his society upon these gentlemen without its having been made quite clear to them beforehand who and what he was; and he was on the point of rising and taking leave, when the silence was broken by Washer.

"‘Madame Bovary!’” he announced quizzically, reading the title of the book the little fat man had been reading when Shelton and Crocker disturbed him; and, holding it close to his rather boiled-looking eyes, he repeated, as though it were a bad joke: “‘Madame Bovary!’”

‘Do you mean to say, Turl, that you can stand that stuff?’ said Berryman.

The name of the book seemed to have galvanized him into life, and, getting off his perch on the arm of the chair, he strolled across to the book-case, took down a volume at random, opened it, and began to read, wandering in a desultory way about the room.

'Ha! Berryman,' said a conciliatory bass voice behind Shelton—it came from Trimmer, who had assumed a position with his back to the hearth, and, leaning his shoulders against the mantel-board, and bending his head forward, grasped with either hand a fist-full of his long gown—'the book's a classic!'

'Classic!' exclaimed Berryman; and, suddenly stopping, he transfixed Shelton, as if the latter had spoken. 'The fellow ought to have been horsewhipped for writing such putridity!'

Shelton felt unaccountably nervous, and yet a peculiar sensation of hostility had sprung up in him; he looked at his little host, who, however, merely blinked.

'Berryman only means,' explained Washer, a certain malice in his smile, 'that the author isn't one of his particular pets.'

'For God's sake, you know, don't get Berryman on his horse!' growled the little fat man suddenly.

Berryman returned his volume to the shelf and took down another. There was something almost godlike in this sarcastic absent-mindedness.

'Imagine a man writing that stuff,' he said, 'if he'd ever been at Eton! What do we want to know about that sort of thing? Pah! I like a writer to be a sportsman and a gentleman;' and again he looked down over his chin at Shelton, as though he expected him to controvert the sentiment.

'Don't you——' began the latter.

But Berryman's attention had wandered again to the wall.

'I really don't care,' said he, 'to know what a woman feels when she is going to the dogs; it doesn't interest me.'

The voice of Trimmer boomed ingratiatingly from the hearth.

'I gather,' he was saying, 'that it's a question of moral standards.'

He had extended his legs till they looked like a pair of compasses, and something in that attitude and the way he grasped the wings of his gown supplied the suggestion of a pair of scales. His lowering smile seemed to embrace the room and deprecate the use of strong expressions. 'After all,' he seemed to say, 'we are men of the world; we know there's not very much in anything. This is the modern spirit; why not give it a look in?'

'Do I understand you to say, Berryman, that you don't enjoy a spicy book?' asked Washer suddenly, with his jeering smile; and at this question the little fat man sniggered, blinking tempestuously, as if to say: 'Nothing pleasanter, don't you know, before a hot fire in cold weather.'

Berryman paid no attention to this impertinent inquiry; he continued to dip into his volume and to walk up and down.

'I've nothing to say,' he remarked, stopping before Shelton, and looking down at him over his chin as if he had suddenly become aware of his presence, 'to you gentlemen who talk of justification through Art. I prefer to call a spade a spade.'

Shelton did not know what to answer; the awkward thing was that he could not tell whether Berryman was addressing him or merely the world at large; his eyes had again strayed to his book, a smile curled his lips, and he went on:

'Do we want to know about the feelings of a middle-

class woman with a taste for vice? Tell me the point of it. No man who was in the habit of taking baths would choose such a subject.'

'Ah! now you come to the question of—ah—subjects,' the voice of Trimmer buzzed genially—he had gathered his garments across his back as tightly as though a fire had been burning in the grate—'but, my dear fellow, Art, properly applied, justifies every subject.'

'For Art,' squeaked Berryman, putting back his second volume and taking down a third, 'you have Homer, Cervantes, Shakespeare, and Ossian; for garbage, a number of unwashed gentlemen.'

There was a general laugh, and Shelton could not help looking round at all in turn. With the exception of Crocker, however, who was half asleep and smiling idiotically, they wore, one and all, an expression as if by no possible chance could they consider any subject fit to affect their hearts; as if, one and all, they were so profoundly anchored on the sea of life that no waves could seem anything but impertinent. It may have been some uncompromising glimmer in this glance of Shelton's that brought Trimmer once more to the rescue with a cosmopolitan air.

'The French,' said he, 'have quite a different standard to ourselves in literature, just as they have a different standard in regard to honour. All this is purely artificial.'

What he meant by these words Shelton found it impossible to divine.

'Ah! honour,' said Washer, '*l'honneur, die Ehre,* duelling, the unfaithful wife——'

He was going to add something, but it was lost; for the little fat man, taking the meerschaum with trembling

fingers, and holding it within two inches of his chin, murmured :

‘ You fellows, Berryman’s awfully strong on honour ; he’s death on duelling.’

Smiling, he blinked twice, and replaced the merr-schaum between his lips.

Without returning the third volume to its shelf, Berryman took down a fourth ; his chest was expanded, and he looked like a man about to do dumb-bells with the books in his hands.

‘ Quite so,’ began Trimmer ; ‘ the change from duelling to law courts is profoundly——’

But whether he were going to say ‘ insignificant ’ or ‘ significant,’ in Shelton’s private opinion he did not know himself, and Berryman here broke in :

‘ Law courts or not, when a man runs away with a wife of mine, I shall punch his head !’

‘ Come, come !’ said Trimmer, with a spasmodic grasp of his two wings.

Shelton had a sudden gleam of inspiration. ‘ If *your* wife deceived you,’ he thought, looking at Trimmer’s eyes, ‘ *you’d* keep it quiet, and hold it over her.’

Washer had passed his hand over his pale chaps, but his disillusioned smile never wavered ; he looked like one lost in the composition of an epigram.

The author of the punching theory stretched his semi-athletic body ; holding the books level with the tops of his shoulders, he might have been preparing to stone somebody with his point of view. His pale face grew paler, his fine eyes finer, his lips more ironical. Almost painful about his tall figure was the combined look of the ‘ strong ’ man and of the student who was bound to go to pieces if you hit him a smart blow.

'As for forgiving unfaithful wives,' he said, 'and all that sort of thing, I don't believe in latter-day sentimentalities.'

The words were so high-pitched and full of sarcastic conviction that they seemed actually to rebound from the wall. Shelton looked hastily round. All their faces were complacent together. He grew red, and suddenly remarked, in a soft, but clear voice :

'I see !'

He was conscious that he had never before made such an impression, and that he never would again. The unanimous, cold hostility flashing out all round was both singular and enlightening ; it instantly gave way to the shades of polite or satirical indulgence peculiar to highly-cultivated organizations. Crocker nervously arose ; he seemed scared, and was clearly relieved when Shelton, following his example, grasped the hand of the little fat man, who bade them good-night in a voice shaken by the fumes of tobacco.

'Who *are* your unshaven friends ?' he heard as the door closed behind them.

CHAPTER XIX

AN INCIDENT

‘ELEVEN o’clock,’ said Crocker, as they went out through the lodge, where the night-porter, penetrating the disguise of their beards, greeted them with an inquisitive civility :

‘I don’t feel a bit sleepy ; shall we take a turn down the “High?”’

Shelton assented ; he was too busy thinking of his sudden encounter with the dons to heed the soreness of his feet. And this, besides, was the last day of his travels, for he had not altered his intention of waiting at Oxford till July 1.

‘We call this place the centre of knowledge,’ he said, as they passed a building presiding, white and silent, over the darkness ; ‘it seems to me as far from being that as Society is from the centre of gentility.’

Crocker’s answer was a grunt ; he was looking up at the stars, as if calculating in how many days he could walk to heaven.

‘No,’ sneered Shelton ; ‘we’ve too much common-sense here to strain our minds. We know when it’s healthy to stop, and play cricket. We pile up news about Papias and the undistributed middle, but as for knowledge of life or one’s self ! Real seekers after know-

ledge are mad. It's a fight in the dark—no quarter given ; the trade of lunatics. We don't grow that sort up here.'

' How jolly the limes smell !' said Crocker.

He had halted opposite a garden, and taken hold of Shelton by one of the buttons of his coat. His brown eyes, like a dog's, slid a wistful look at him. It seemed as though he wished to say something, but was afraid of giving offence.

' They tell you,' pursued Shelton, ' that we learn to be gentlemen here. Now, my notion is you learn that through a single incident that touches your heart better than you learn it here in three years.'

' Hum !' muttered Crocker, twisting strongly at the button ; ' those fellows who seemed the best sorts up here have turned out the best sorts afterwards.'

' I hope not,' said Shelton gloomily ; ' I was a snob when I was up here. I believed all I was told, anything that made things pleasant ; my "set" were nothing but——'

Crocker smiled in the darkness ; he had been too ' mad ' to belong to Shelton's ' set. '

' You never were much like your "set," old chap,' he broke in.

Shelton turned away, put his face between the high railings, and sniffed the scent of the limes. Images were crowding into his mind. The faces of his old friends strangely mingled with those of people he had met lately—the girl in the train, Ferrand, the lady with the short, round, powdered face, the French barber, and many others, and, floating detached, mysteriously connected with them all, the face of Antonia. The scent of the limes for a moment died away, then drifted

at him with the full magic of its sweetness. From the street behind the footsteps of the passers-by sounded muffled, yet exact, and on the puffs of the breeze came the strains : ‘For he’s a jolly good fellow ! For he’s a jolly good fellow ! For he’s a jolly good fe-ellow ! And so say all of us !’

‘Ah !’ he said, ‘they were good chaps.’

‘You know, Bird,’ murmured Crocker, ‘I used to think some of them had too much side on.’

He had lost his hold of Shelton’s button, but still wore the look of wishing to say something painful.

Shelton laughed.

‘The thing sickens me when I think of it,’ said he—‘the whole snobbish, selfish business. The place sickens me, lined with cotton-wool—made so beastly comfortable.’

Crocker shook his head.

‘It’s a splendid old place,’ he said sadly ; his eyes wandered, and fastened at last on Shelton’s boots. ‘You know, old chap,’ he stammered, ‘I think you—you ought to take care !’

‘Take care ?’ replied Shelton ; ‘what of ?’

Crocker seized his arm and pressed it convulsively.

‘Don’t be waxy, old boy,’ he said : ‘I mean that you seem somehow—to be—to be losing yourself.’

‘Losing myself !’ said Shelton, surprised. ‘Ha ! finding myself, you mean !’

Crocker did not reply ; over his face came a look of disappointment. What exactly he was thinking cannot be told. In Shelton’s heart there was a sort of bitter pleasure in the consciousness that his friend was uncomfortable on his account, a sort of contempt, and a sort of aching. Crocker broke the silence at last,

'I think I shall do a bit more walking to-night,' he said; 'I feel very fit. Don't you really mean to come any further with me, Bird?'

There was a touch of anxiety in his voice, as though Shelton were in danger of missing something good. The latter grinned; his feet instantly began to ache and burn.

'Not exactly,' he replied; 'you know what I'm staying for.'

'I know, I know,' replied Crocker humbly; 'she lives near here. Well, then, I'll say good-bye. I should like to do another ten miles to-night.'

'My dear fellow, you're as tired as a rook.'

Crocker chuckled.

'No,' he said, looking foolish; 'I want to get on. I shall see you in London. Good-bye!' and with a painfully strong grip of Shelton's hand, he turned and limped away.

Shelton called after him: 'Don't be an idiot! You'll only knock yourself up.'

But the sole answer was the pale moon of Crocker's face screwed round for a second in the darkness, and the waving of his stick.

Shelton strolled slowly on in the same direction, and, leaning over the bridge, watched the oily gleam of the lamps on the dark water under the trees. He felt relieved yet sorry, and withal a little sore at being deserted. His thoughts were random, curious, half sweet, half mutinous. That afternoon five years ago, when he had walked back from the river with Antonia across the Christchurch meadows, was vividly in his mind; the scent of that afternoon had never died away with him—the aroma of love at first sight. Soon

she would be his wife—his wife ! The faces of the our
dons sprang up before him. They had wives, perhaps
—fat, lean, satirical, compromising. What was it that
through all their diversity they had in common—a sort
of cultured intolerance ? Honour ! A queer subject
to discuss. Honour ! The honour that made a fuss,
and stood on its rights ! Shelton smiled. ‘As if it were
a man’s *honour* that suffered when he was injured !’
And slowly, still with that smile on his face, he walked
back up the echoing, empty street to his room at the
Bishop’s Head. Next morning he received the follow-
ing wire :

‘Thirty miles left ; eighteen hours ; heel bad ; going
strong.—CROCKER.’

He passed a fortnight at the Bishop’s Head, waiting for
the end of his probation, and the end seemed long in
coming. To be so near Antonia, and as far as if he lived
in another world, was not conducive to rest. Every day,
as a forlorn hope, he took a sculling skiff, and pulled
down to the neighbourhood of Holm Oaks, on the
chance of her paying the river a visit ; but the house
was three miles off, and the chance but slender. She
never came. After spending the afternoons like this
he would return, pulling hard against the stream, with
an inexplicable feeling of relief, dine heartily, and fall
a-dreaming over his cigar. Each morning he awoke in
an excited mood, devoured his letter if he had one, and
sat down to write to her in return. These letters of
his were the most amazing portion of that fortnight.
They were chiefly remarkable for failing to express any
single one of his real thoughts, but they were full of
sentiments, which were not in the least what he really

felt ; and once when he set himself to analyze this, he passed through such moments of delirium that he was scared, even shocked, and quite unable to write anything. He made the discovery that no two human beings ever tell each other what they really feel, except, perhaps, in situations with which he could not connect Antonia's calm eyes and brilliant smile. All the world was too deeply engaged in conspiring decency.

Absorbed by his longings, he but vaguely realized the many-hued turmoil of Commemoration, which had gathered its hundreds for their annual cure of salmon mayonnaise and cheap champagne. In preparation for his visit to Holm Oaks he shaved his beard, and had a consignment of clothes sent down from London. With them was forwarded a letter from Ferrand, which ran as follows :

‘IMPERIAL PEACOCK HOTEL,
‘FOLKESTONE.

‘June 20.

‘MY DEAR SIR,

‘Forgive me for not having written to you before, but I have been so bothered that I have felt no taste for writing ; when I have the time, I have some curious stories to tell you. Once again I have encountered that demon of misfortune which dogs my footsteps. Being occupied all day and nearly all night upon business which brings me a heap of worries and next to no profit, I have no chance to look after my things. Thieves have entered my room, stolen everything, and left me an empty box. I am once again almost without clothes, and know not where to turn to make that figure necessary for the fulfilment of my duties. You see, I am not lucky. Since coming to

your country, the sole piece of fortune I have had was to tumble on a man like you. Excuse me for not writing more at this moment. Hoping that you are in good health, and in affectionately pressing your hand,

‘I am,

‘Always your devoted,

‘LOUIS FERRAND.’

Upon reading this letter Shelton had once more a sense of being exploited, of which he was so ashamed that he sat down immediately and wrote the following reply :

‘BISHOP’S HEAD HOTEL,
‘OXFORD.

‘June 25.

‘MY DEAR FERRAND,

‘I am grieved to hear of your misfortunes. I was much hoping that you had made a good start. I enclose you Post Office Orders for four pounds. Always glad to hear from you.

‘Yours sincerely,

‘RICHARD SHELTON.’

He posted it with the satisfaction that a man feels who so nobly shakes off his responsibilities.

Three days before the first of July he met with one of those disturbing incidents which never befall people who attend quietly to the collection of property and reputation.

The night was unbearably hot, and, strolling with his cigar, he had wandered down the Corn Market, turned off towards the theatre, and was coming back in

the direction of the ‘Broad,’ when a woman came sidling across and spoke to him. He perceived her to be one of those creatures fashioned by men into mediums for their own pleasure, to feel sympathy with whom he knew to be sentimental. Her face was flushed, her whisper hoarse ; there was nothing attractive about her but the curves of her tawdry figure. Shelton was repelled by the proprietary tone of her voice, repelled by her blowzy face, by the scent of patchouli. Her touch on his arm startled him, sending a shiver through his marrow ; he almost leaped aside, and increased his pace. But her breathing as she followed sounded laboured, and it suddenly seemed to him pitiful that a woman should have to pant after him like that.

‘The least I can do,’ he thought, ‘is to speak to her decently.’ He stopped therefore, and, with an odd mixture of hardness and compassion, said : ‘It’s impossible.’

In spite of her professional smile, he saw by the disappointed eyes that she accepted the impossibility.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said.

She muttered something. Shelton shook his head.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said once more. ‘Good-night !’

The woman bit her lower lip.

‘Good-night,’ she answered dully.

At the corner of the street he happened to turn his head. The woman was hurrying uneasily, and a policeman coming from behind out of the shadow had put a hand on her shoulder.

His heart began beating. ‘Heavens !’ he thought, ‘what am I to do now?’ And his first impulse was to dive down the lighted Corn Market and forget all about it—to

act, in fact, like any ordinary, decent person who did not care to be mixed up in such an affair.

He retraced his steps, however, and halted half a dozen paces from the two figures.

'Ask the gentleman! He spoke to me,' she was saying in her brassy voice, through the emphasis of which Shelton could detect all her fear.

'That's all right,' returned the policeman; 'we know all about that.'

'You — police!' cried the woman, with tears in her voice; 'I've got to get my living, haven't I, the same as you?'

Shelton hesitated again, caught the look in her eyes, and stepped forward. The policeman turned, and at the first sight of that heavy, pale face, cut by the cheek-strap, and the bullying eyes looking down at him, he felt both hate and fear, as if suddenly brought face to face with the crystallization of all that he most loathed and despised, yet strangely dreaded. The cold certainty of law and order upholding the strong and treading underfoot the weak, the smug front of an invincible meanness that only the purest flame may attack, seemed to be facing him. The odd thing was that the man was actually doing his duty. Shelton moistened his lips.

'You're not going to charge her?' he said.

'Aren't I?' returned the policeman.

'Look here, constable, you're making a mistake.'

The policeman took out his note-book.

'Oh, I'm making a mistake, am I? I'll take your name and address, please; we have to report these things.'

'By all means,' said Shelton, angrily giving it. 'I spoke to her first.'

'Perhaps you'll come up to the court to-morrow morning and repeat that,' replied the policeman, with cold incivility.

Shelton looked at him with all the force of which he was capable.

'You had better be careful, constable,' he said ; but in the very act of uttering the words he thought how pitiable they sounded.

'We're not to be trifled with,' returned the policeman in a menacing voice.

Shelton could think of nothing but to repeat those pitiable words :

'You had better be careful, constable.'

'You're a gentleman,' replied the policeman, 'and I'm only a policeman. You've got the riches, but I've got the power.'

Grasping the woman's arm, he began to move her along. The words had fallen on Shelton's ears like the trumpet-note of his private distrust.

'That'll do,' said he, and walked away in a rage.

He went to Grinnings' Club, and flung himself into a chair. Oddly enough, his feeling was not one of pity for the woman, nor of peculiar anger with the policeman, but rather of dissatisfaction with himself.

'What ought I to have done ?' he thought ; 'the beggar was within his rights.'

He stared gloomily at the Badminton series decorating a bookcase, and a kind of disgust surged up in him.

'One or other of us,' he reflected, 'makes these women what they are. And when we've made them, we can't do without them ; we don't want to, but we give them no proper homes, so that they're reduced to prowl about the streets, and then—we run them in. Ha ! that's

good—excellent! And here,’ he went on, screwing his back into the chair so as to get the full benefit of the cushions, ‘we sit and carp. But what do we *do*? Nothing! Our system is the most highly civilized known. We get the benefit without soiling even the hem of our reputation, and it’s only the women that suffer. And why shouldn’t they—a weak, inferior animal?’

He lit a cigarette and ordered the waiter to bring him a drink.

‘I’ll go to the court, anyway,’ he thought; but suddenly it occurred to him that the details would be in the local papers, and he buried his face in his glass, unwilling to confess to himself the return of his fears. The press would never miss so lovely a little bit of scandal—‘Gentleman *v.* Policeman!’ It would certainly be in the local papers. And in his mind’s eye he had a vision of Antonia’s father, a neighbouring and conscientious magistrate, solemnly reading it. Someone, at all events, was bound to see his name and make a point of mentioning it;—too good to be missed!—and he suddenly saw with horror that to be of any use to the woman he would have to repeat his assertion that he had spoken to her first.

‘I *must* go to the court!’ he kept thinking, as if to assure himself that he was not a coward.

He lay awake half the night worrying over his dilemma.

‘But I *didn’t* speak to her first,’ he told himself; ‘and if I go, I shall only be telling a lie, and they’ll make me swear it!’

He tried to persuade himself that this was against his conscience, but at the bottom of his heart he knew

that he would have no hesitation in telling such a lie if only guaranteed free from the consequences ; on the contrary, it appeared to him the most obvious piece of chivalry.

‘But why should *I* suffer ?’ he thought ; ‘*I’ve* done nothing. It’s neither reasonable nor just.’

He hated the unhappy woman who was causing him these horrors of indecision. Whenever he had decided one way or the other, the policeman’s face, with its cold, muddy, tyrannical eyes, rose before him like a nightmare, and forced him, as it were, to an opposite conviction. He fell asleep at last with the full determination to go and see what happened.

He woke with a dull sense of disturbance. ‘I can do no good by going,’ he thought, remembering, and lying very still ; ‘they’re certain to believe the policeman. I shall only blacken myself for nothing ;’ and the combat began again within him, but with far less fury. It was not what other people would think, not even the risk of perjury that mattered (all this he made perfectly clear to himself)—it was Antonia. It was not right to her to put himself in so false a position ; in fact, not decent. All the same, he had better go and see what happened.

He breakfasted. In the room were some Americans, and the face of one, a young girl, reminded him a little of Antonia. Fainter and fainter grew the incident of the woman ; it seemed now in better proportion.

Two hours later he looked at the clock ; it was lunch time. He had not gone, had not perjured himself ; but he wrote to a daily paper, pointing out the great danger run by the community from the power which a universal and proper belief in their infallibility places in the

hands of the police — how, since they are the sworn abettors of right and justice, their word is necessarily taken as gospel; how one and all they hang together, from mingled motives of interest and *esprit de corps*! And was it not, he said, reasonable to suppose that amongst thousands of human beings invested with such opportunities there would be found bullies who would take advantage of them, and rise to distinction in the service upon the helplessness of the unfortunate and the cowardice of people with any reputation to lose? He ended by demonstrating that those who have in their hands the sacred duties of selecting a practically irresponsible body of men are bound, for the sake of freedom and common humanity, to exercise those duties with the utmost care and clear-sightedness. . . .

However true, none of this helped him to think any better of himself at heart, and he was haunted by the idea that a stout and honest bit of perjury was worth more than a letter to a daily paper.

He never saw his letter in print, containing, as it did, the germs of an unpalatable truth.

He hired a horse, and galloped on Port Meadow. The strain of his indecision over, he felt like a man recovering from an illness, and he carefully abstained from looking at the local papers. There was that within him, however, which resented the defeat of his courage.

CHAPTER XX

HOLM OAKS

HOLM OAKS stood back but a little way from the road—an old manor-house, not set upon display, but dwelling close to its barns, stables, and walled gardens, like a good mother ; long, flat-roofed, and red, it had Queen Anne windows, about whose white-framed diamond panes the sunbeams were flashing brightly.

In front of it a fringe of elms, of all trees the tree of established principles, bordered the stretch of turf between the yellow drive and the road ; and these elms were the homes of rooks—of all birds the bird of convention. A huge aspen—impressionable creature—shivered and shook on the opposite side, never able to do enough to apologize for its appearance among its imperturbable surroundings. It was the haunt of a cuckoo, who came once a year to hoot at the established order of things, but seldom stayed long ; for boys threw stones at it, exasperated, no doubt, by the unsoundness of its principles.

The village which clustered in the dip of the road had not yet lost its horror of motor cars. About this group of flat-faced cottages with gabled roofs the scent of hay, manure, and roses clung continually ; just now there was something foreign to its sturdy servility in

the troubling odour of the limes. Beyond the dip again, a square-towered church kept within its gray walls the record of the village flock, births, deaths, and marriages—even the births of bastards, even the deaths of suicides—and seemed to stretch an invisible hand over the heads of the common people to grasp the hand of the manor-house. There was something decent and discreet in the way the two roofs caught the eye to the exclusion of meaner dwellings, seeming to have entered into a conspiracy to keep them out of sight.

The first sun of July had been hot on his face all the way from Oxford, but Shelton was pale when he walked up the drive and rang the bell.

‘Mrs. Dennant at home, Dobson?’ he asked of the butler, who, old servant that he was, still wore coloured trousers (for it was not yet twelve o’clock, and he regarded coloured trousers up to noon as a sacred distinction between himself and the footmen).

‘Mrs. Dennant,’ replied this personage, raising his round, pale, and hairless face, while upon his mouth appeared the apologetic pout which comes of living with the best families—‘Mrs. Dennant has gone into the village, sir; but Miss Antonia is in the boudoir.’

Abandoning to the butler his stick and straw hat, Shelton crossed the oak-panelled, low-roofed hall, through the far side of which the lawn could be seen, a vision of serenity. He mounted six wide, shallow steps, and stopped. From behind the closed door of the boudoir came the sound of scales, and he stood there, a prey to his emotions, the notes mingling pell-mell in his ears with the beating of his heart. He knocked, and softly turned the handle, a fixed smile upon his lips.

Antonia was bending over the piano, her head bobbing to the emphasis of her fingers, her white shoes rhythmically pressing the pedals, and on those shoes Shelton's eyes riveted themselves; the monotonously moving, slim feet were fascinating. She had evidently been playing tennis, for a racquet and tam-o'-shanter were flung down on the top of the piano, and she was dressed in a blue skirt and a white blouse, fitting collarless round the base of her slender throat, like a line of marble in relief at the base of a column. Her face was flushed and absorbed, with compressed lips and a slight frown; and as her fingers raced over the keys, her neck swayed, and the silk clung and shivered on her arms.

Shelton's eyes fastened on the silently-counting lips, on the fair hair about her forehead, the darker eyebrows slanting a little down towards the nose, the undimpled cheeks with the faint finger-marks under the gray-blue eyes, the softly pointed, undimpled chin, the whole remote, suntouched, sweet, and glacial face.

She turned her head, and, springing up, cried :

'Dick! What fun!' And she gave him both her hands, but her smiling face said very plainly, 'Oh, don't let us be sentimental!'

'Aren't you glad to see me?' muttered Shelton.

'Glad to see you! You *are* funny, Dick!—as if you didn't know! Why, you've shaved your beard! Mother and Sybil have gone down to the village to see old Mrs. Hopkins. Shall we go out? Thea and the boys are playing tennis. It's so jolly that you've come!' She caught up the tam-o'-shanter, and riveted it to her knot of hair. Almost as tall as Shelton, she looked taller, with arms raised and loose sleeves quivering like

wings to the movements of her quick fingers. ‘We might have a game before lunch ; you can have my other racquet.’

‘I’ve got no things,’ said Shelton blankly.

Her calm glance ran over his figure.

‘You can have some of old Bernard’s ; he’s got any amount. I’ll wait for you.’ She swung her racquet, looked at Shelton, cried, ‘Be quick !’ and vanished.

Shelton ran upstairs, and dressed in the undecided way of a man assuming another person’s clothes. She was in the hall when he descended, humming a tune and prodding at the toe of her shoe ; her smile showed him all her pearly upper teeth. There seemed to Shelton a sort of curiosity in her eyes, as if she saw in him an element unexpected and disturbing ; it suggested even something unhappy in her thoughts about him. He caught hold of her sleeve and whispered :

‘Antonia !’

The colour rushed into her cheeks ; she looked back across her shoulder.

‘Come along, you old Dick !’ she cried ; and, flinging open the glass-door, ran into the garden.

Shelton followed.

The tennis-ground was divided from a paddock by netting ; a holm-oak shaded one corner, and its foliage, thick and dark, made an unexpected blurr in the green smoothness of the picture. On the farther court Bernard and Thea stopped playing as Antonia and Shelton came into sight ; his old schoolfellow came forward and cordially grasped his hand. From the far side of the net his opponent, a young girl in a shortish skirt, tossed her straight fair hair back from her eyes, and warding off the sun with her sleeve, came strolling towards them.

The umpire, a small boy of twelve, was lying on his stomach, squealing and tickling a collie. Shelton bent over and prodded him in the back.

‘ Hallo, Toddles ! you young ruffian !’ he said.

One and all they stood round Shelton, and there was something pitilessly frank and inquiring in their eyes, in the angle of their noses something chaffing and distrustful, as though there were about him some subtle and poignant scent which excited their curiosity and disapproval.

When the setts were over, and the girls resting in the double hammock under the holm-oak, Shelton went with Bernard into the paddock to hunt for lost balls.

‘ I say, old chap,’ said his future brother-in-law with a dry smile, ‘ you’re in for a bit of a wigging from the Mater.’

‘ A wigging ?’ repeated Shelton.

‘ I don’t know much about it, but from something she let drop it seems you’ve been saying some odd things in your letters to Antonia ;’ and again he looked up at Shelton with his queer, dry smile.

‘ Odd things ?’ said the latter angrily. ‘ What d’you mean ?’ He stopped his search for the tennis-ball to look Bernard in the face.

‘ Oh, don’t ask me,’ said the latter ; ‘ the Mater thinks she’s in a bad way—unsettled, or what d’you call it. You’ve been telling her that things are not what they seem. That’s bad, you know ;’ and still smiling, he shook his head.

Shelton dropped his eyes.

‘ Well, they aren’t !’ he said.

‘ Oh, that’s all right ! But don’t bring your philosophy down here, old chap.’

'Philosophy!' said Shelton, puzzled.

'Well, leave us a prejudice or two sacred.'

'Sacred!' said Shelton; 'nothing's sacred, but——'
He did not, however, finish his remark. 'I don't understand,' he concluded.

'Ideals, and that sort of thing. You've been diving below the line of "practical politics," that's about the size of it, my boy;' and, stooping suddenly, Bernard picked up the last ball. 'There *is* the Mater!' he said; and Shelton saw Mrs. Dennant approaching the lawn with Sybil, her second daughter.

By the time they reached the holm-oak the three girls had departed towards the house, walking arm in arm, and Mrs. Dennant was standing alone, in a gray dress, talking to an under-gardener. Her hands, cased in tan gauntlets, held a basket which warded off, as it were, the bearded gardener in shirt-sleeves from the severe but ample lines of her useful-looking skirt. The collie, erect on its haunches, looked up at their faces, pricking his ears in the endeavour to appreciate the distinction between these two bipeds.

'Thank you; that'll do, Bunyan,' she said. Her face wore its usual expression of kindly and practical benevolence. 'Ah, Dick! It's charmin' to see you at last!'

In his intercourse with Mrs. Dennant, Shelton never failed to be impressed by the representative character of her personality. It always seemed to him that he had met so many other ladies like her. He felt that her undoubtable quality had a sort of non-individual flavour, as if she stood for a class, and would have considered it a little improper to stand for herself; yet certainly she was full of character. Tall, with nose

a trifle beaked, a long, sloping chin, and an assured, benevolent mouth, showing, perhaps, too much of her teeth, she was thin, yet not unsubstantial. Her accent in speaking always left on his mind the impression that she had a peculiar heritage in the language ; it was a species of drawl which disregarded the vulgar merits of tone, leaned on some syllables, and despised the final *g*—the peculiar accent, in fact, of the aristocracy, adding its flat, deliberate joys to a life neither musical nor long.

Shelton knew that she had many interests ; she was never really idle, from the time (7 a.m.) when her maid brought her a little earthenware pot of tea with a single extra-toast biscuit, her pet dog, Tops, and the house-keeper's book, till eleven o'clock at night, when she lighted a wax candle in a silver candlestick, and with this in one hand, and in the other a new novel, or, better still, one of those charming volumes written by great people about the still greater people they have met, she said good-night to her guests and children. No ! What with photography, the presidency of a local league, visiting the rich, superintending the poor, gardening, books, and keeping all her ideas tidy so that no foreign notions might stray in, she was never idle. The information she collected from all these sources was both varied and vast, but he knew that she never allowed it to flavour her opinions, which lacked sauce, and were drawn from some sort of dish into which, with all her class, she dipped her fingers.

He liked her. No one could help liking her. She was so kind, and of such good quality, with a suggestion about her appearance of thin, excellent, and useful china ; and she was scented, too—not with verbena, violets, or those essences in which women delight, but

with nothing at all, as if she had taken a stand against meretricity. In her intercourse with persons not 'quite the thing' (she excepted the vicar from this category, though his father had been a haberdasher), her refinement, gently, unobtrusively, and with great practical good sense, seemed continually to murmur: 'I am, and you—well, *are* you, don't you know?' But there was not an ounce of self-consciousness about this attitude, for she was really not a common woman. He supposed that she simply could not help it; all her people had done it. Their nurses breathed over them in their cradles something that, being inhaled into their systems, ever afterwards prevented them from taking a good, clear breath. And her manner! Ah! her manner—that golden seal of good form which concealed the inner woman so admirably as to leave doubt of her existence!

Shelton listened to the kindly briskness with which she complained of the under-gardener.

'Poor Bunyan! he lost his wife six months ago, and was quite cheerful at first, but now he's really too distressin'. I've done all I can to rouse him; it's so melancholy to see him mopin' about. And, my dear Dick, the way he mangles the new rose-trees! I'm afraid he's goin' mad; I shall have to send him away, poor fellow!'

It was clear that she sympathized with the under-gardener, or, rather, she firmly believed that he was entitled to a modicum of wholesome grief, the loss of a wife being one of the canonized and legitimate sources of sorrow. But excesses!

'I've told him I'll raise his wages,' she sighed. 'He used to be such a good gardener! That reminds me,

my dear Dick ; I want to have a talk with you. Shall we go to in lunch ?'

Consulting the memorandum-book in which she had been noting the case of old Mrs. Hopkins, she slightly preceded Shelton towards the house.

It was somewhat late that afternoon when Shelton received his 'wigging' ; nor did it seem to him, hypnotized by the momentary absence of Antonia, such a very serious affair.

'Now, Dick,' the Honourable Mrs. Dennant began, in her decisive drawl, 'I don't think it's right to put ideas into Antonia's head.'

'Ideas !' murmured Shelton confusedly.

'We all know,' continued his future mother-in-law, 'that things are not always what they ought to be.'

Shelton looked at her ; she was seated at her writing-table, addressing in her large, free handwriting a dinner invitation to a reactionary Bishop. There was not the faintest trace of embarrassment about her, yet Shelton could not help feeling a slight shock. If she—she—did not think things were what they ought to be, things must indeed be in a bad way !

'Things !' he muttered.

Mrs. Dennant looked at him firmly but kindly, with the eyes that would remind him of a hare's.

'She showed me some of your letters, you know. Well, it's not a bit of use denyin', my dear Dick, that you've been thinkin' too much lately.'

Shelton perceived that he had done her an injustice ; she handled 'things' as she would handle the under-gardener—put them away like a sensible being as soon as they ran to inconvenient extremes.

'I can't help that,' he answered with a sulky smile.

'Oh, my dear boy! you'll never get on that way. Now, I want you to promise me you won't talk to Antonia about those sort of things.'

Shelton raised his eyebrows.

'Oh, you know what I mean!'

He saw that to press Mrs. Dennant to go beyond the word 'things'—to reduce it, for instance, to conventions, doubts, or ideals—would really hurt her sense of 'good form'; it would be cruel to force her even as far as that below the surface!

'Ah!' he said; 'yes, quite so!'

To his extreme surprise however, flushing the peculiar and pathetic flush of women past their prime, she said with an accentuation of her drawl:

'About the poor—and criminals—and marriages—there was that wedding you went to, you know.'

Shelton bowed his head. He felt sorry, for he saw that motherhood had suddenly been too strong for her, and in her maternal flutter she had actually committed the solecism of touching in so many words on subjects which were 'impossible.'

'Yet,' he thought, assisting her sympathetically to light the urn for afternoon tea, 'she doesn't really see anything funny in one man dining off gold, and another dining in the gutter; or in two people living together in perfect discord to encourage the others; or in worshipping Jesus Christ and standing up for her rights at the same time; or in despising foreigners because they *are* foreigners; or in war; or in anything that *is* funny.' But he did her a certain amount of justice by recognising that this was natural, since her whole life had been passed in trying not to see the fun in these things.

Antonia had come back, and stood smiling in the

doorway. How brilliant and gay she looked, and yet a little resentful, as if she knew they had been talking about her! She sat down on the sofa by Shelton's side, and, rocking her foot, began asking him about the young foreigner he had spoken of in his letters. Her eyes, neither quite shocked nor quite eager, made him doubt whether she, too, saw the fun that lay in one human being patronizing another.

'But I suppose he's really *good*,' she said—'I mean, all those things he told you about were only—'

'Good!' he returned, fidgeting; 'I don't really know what the word means.'

Her eyes clouded. 'Dick, how can you?' they seemed to say.

Shelton stroked her sleeve.

'Tell us about Mr. Crocker,' she said, taking no notice of his caress.

And Shelton was beset by a sudden impatience of his old College friend. He knew she would understand the practical idealism of his travelling companion too well, and he was jealous.

'The old lunatic!' said he.

'Lunatic! Why, in your letters he was so splendid.'

'So he is,' said Shelton, ashamed; 'he's not a bit mad, really—that is, I only wish I were half as mad.'

'Who's that mad?' queried Mrs. Dennant from behind the urn—'Tom Crocker? Ah, yes! I knew his mother; she was a Springer.'

'Did he do it in the week?' said Thea, appearing suddenly in the window with a kitten.

'I don't know,' Shelton was obliged to answer.

Thea shook back her hair with uncompromising frankness.

'I call it awfully slack of you not to have found out,' she said.

Antonia frowned.

'You were very sweet to that young foreigner, you know, Dick,' she murmured with a smile at Shelton. 'I wish we could see him.'

But Shelton shook his head in distress.

'It seems to me,' he muttered, 'that I did about as little for him as I possibly could.'

Again her face grew thoughtful, as though his words had chilled her.

'I don't see what more you could have done,' she answered.

A desire to get close to her, half fear, half ache, a sense of futility and bafflement, an inner burning, made him feel as though a flame were licking at his heart.

CHAPTER XXI

ENGLISH

JUST as Shelton was starting to walk back to Oxford that evening, whence he was to return on the morrow to stay, he met Mr. Dennant coming in from a ride. Antonia's father was a spare, medium-sized man, with a yellowish face, thin, gray moustache, ironical brows, and a few tiny crow's-feet. In his old, short gray coat, with little slits up the two back seams, his drab cord breeches, ancient mahogany leggings, and carefully blacked boots, he had a dry, threadbare quality not without distinction.

'Ah, Shelton!' he said, in his quietly festive voice; 'glad to see the pilgrim at last. You're not off already?' and, laying his hand on Shelton's arm, he proposed to walk a little way with him across the fields.

It was the first time they had met since the engagement, and Shelton began nerving himself for the effort of saying something to express, however badly, his adoration, his desire to protect and cherish Antonia. He squared his shoulders, cleared his throat, and looked askance at Mr. Dennant. That gentleman was walking stiffly, his cord breeches rubbing one against the other with faint squeaks. He switched a yellow, jointed cane constantly against his leggings, and after each blow

looked at his legs satirically. He himself was rather like that yellow cane—pale, and slim, and jointed, with features arching a little, like the arching of its handle.

'They say it 'll be a bad year for fruit,' said Shelton at last.

'They? My dear fellow, you don't know your farmer, I'm afraid. We ought to hang a farmer or two—do a world of good. Dear souls! I've got magnificent strawberries.'

'I suppose,' chimed in Shelton, only too glad to postpone the evil moment, 'that in a climate like this a man *must* grumble or die.'

'Quite so,' replied Mr. Dennant: 'look at us poor slaves of landowners; if I couldn't abuse the farmers I should be miserable. Did you ever see anything finer than this pasture? And they want me to lower their rents!'

His glance wavered ironically, rested for a second on Shelton, and whisked back to the ground, as though he had seen something alarming. There was a pause.

'Now for it!' thought the younger man.

Mr. Dennant had begun stealthily to gnaw a strand of his moustache; he kept his eyes fixed mockingly on his boots.

'If they'd said,' he remarked with sudden jocosity, 'that the frost had nipped the young partridges, there'd have been some sense in it; but what can you expect? They've no consideration, dear souls!'

Shelton took a deep breath, and, with averted eyes, hurriedly began:

'It's awfully hard, sir, to——'

Mr. Dennant switched his cane smartly against his shin.

'Yes,' he said, 'it's awfully hard to put up with, but what's a fellow to do? One must have farmers. Why, if it wasn't for the farmers, there'd still be a hare or two about the place!'

Shelton gave a spasmodic laugh, and again glanced askance at his future father-in-law. What did the wagging of his head mean, the deepening of his crow's-feet, the odd contraction about the mouth? And his eye caught Mr. Dennant's eye; its expression was queer above the fine, dry nose (one of the sort that easily reddens in a wind).

'I've never had much to do with farmers,' he said.

'Haven't you?' murmured Mr. Dennant; 'lucky fellow! The most—yes, *quite* the most trying portion of the human species—next to daughters,' he concluded dubiously.

'Well, sir, you can hardly expect *me*—' began Shelton.

'I don't—oh, I don't! D'you know, I really believe we're in for a ducking.'

A large black cloud covered the sun, and some heavy drops were spattering on Mr. Dennant's hard felt hat.

Shelton welcomed the shower; it appeared to him a perfect intervention of Providence. He would *have* to say something, but not now, later—some other day.

'I'll go on,' he said; 'I don't mind the rain. But you'd better get back as quick as you can, sir.'

'Dear me! there's a tenant of mine in this cottage,' Mr. Dennant said, with his leisurely dryness—'a capital poacher. The least we can do is to ask him for shelter; what do you think?' and smiling sarcastically, as though deprecating his own desire not to get wet, he rapped on the door of a neat and prosperous-looking cottage.

It was opened by a girl of much the same age and height as Antonia.

‘Ah, Phœbe ! Your father in ?’

‘No,’ replied the girl, fluttering and blushing ; ‘father’s out, Mr. Dennant.’

‘So sorry ! Will you let us bide a bit out of the rain ?’

The sweet-looking Phœbe hurriedly dusted them two chairs in the parlour, and, curtseying, left them alone.

‘What a pretty girl !’ said Shelton.

‘Yes, she’s a pretty girl ; half the young fellows are after her, but she won’t leave her father. Oh ! he’s a charming rascal, that fellow !’

This remark, from beneath Mr. Dennant’s drooping gray moustache, suddenly brought home to Shelton the conviction that he was further than ever from avoiding the necessity of speaking. To conceal his embarrassment he walked to the window, beyond which the rain was coming down with almost tropical fury, though a golden line at the back of the sky promised the shower’s speedy end. ‘For goodness’ sake,’ he thought, ‘let me say something, however idiotic, and get it over !’ But in spite of this, he did not turn round ; a kind of paralysis had its grip on him.

‘Tremendously heavy rain !’ he observed at last ; ‘coming down like a waterspout !’

It would have been just as easy to say : ‘I believe your daughter to be the most exquisite thing on earth ; I love her, and, please Heaven, I’m going to make her happy !’ Just as easy, just about the same amount of breath required ; yet what he did say seemed wholesome and decent, and what he did not say (though quite as true),

false, indecent, perfectly damnable. His eyes, glued to the pane, watched the rain stream and hiss against the leaves and churn the dust on the parched road with its insistent torrent ; and he noticed with a stupid precision all the details of the process going on outside —how the raindrops darted at the leaves like spears, and how the leaves shook themselves free a thousand times in a minute, while little runnels of water, ice-clear, rolled over their edges, soft, regular, and quick. He noticed, too, the lugubrious head of a sheltering cow on the opposite side of the road remonstrating with the whites of its eyes, and chewing pettishly the leaves of the hedge.

Mr. Dennant had not replied to his remark about the rain. And so disconcerting was this half minute of silence that in pure desperation Shelton turned resolutely to offer a libation of his feelings to this spare, satirical gentleman in mahogany leggings upon the wooden chair. His future father-in-law was staring at his well-blacked boots, bending forward over his parted knees, and prodding at the carpet with the end of his cane ; a half-glimpse at his face disturbed Shelton's resolution. It was not forbidding, stern, irritated, or discouraging—not in the least ; it had merely for the moment ceased to look satirical. And this in itself was so startling that Shelton lost his chance of speaking. There actually seemed a heart to Mr. Dennant's gravity ; it was almost pathetic, as though he were looking grave because he felt grave. He glanced up at Shelton, and at once the fine, dry jocosity reappeared in his face.

‘ Admirable !’ said he. ‘ What a day for ducks !’ and again there were unmistakable signs of alarm in his

eye. Was it possible that he, too, dreaded something as well as Shelton ?

‘I can’t express——’ began the latter hurriedly.

‘Yes, it’s beastly to get wet,’ said Mr. Dennant ; and, rising from his seat, he began softly rubbing his hands, and humming ‘The Lincolnshire Poacher’ :

“For we can wrestle and fight, my boys,
And jump out anywhere.”

You’ll be with us for that dinner-party next week, eh ? Capital ! There’s the Bishop of Blumenthal and old Sir Jack Buckwell ; I must get Mrs. Dennant to put you between them—

“For it’s my delight of a starry night.”

The Bishop’s a great anti-divorce man, and old Buckwell’s been in the court at least twice—

“In the season of the year !”

‘Will you please to take some tea, gentlemen ?’ said Phœbe, appearing in the doorway.

‘No, thank you, Phœbe,’ replied Mr. Dennant. ‘That girl ought to get married,’ he went on, as Phœbe withdrew. A flush showed queerly on his sallow cheeks. ‘It’s a shame to keep her tied to her father’s apron-strings—selfish beggar, that fellow !’ He looked up sharply, as if he had said something dangerous, and resumed his humming :

“The keeper he was watching us,
For him we didn’t care !”

A flash of light suddenly illumined Shelton’s mind : Antonia’s father was as anxious to say something ex-

pressive of his feelings as he was himself, and as unable to get it out. What a queer business !

‘ You know, sir——’ he began.

Mr. Dennant’s eyebrows rose ever so little ; with a tremor his crow’s-feet twinkled ; all his contained, satirical personality seemed to shrink together.

‘ By Jove !’ he said briskly, ‘ it’s stopped raining ! Now’s our chance ! Come along, my dear fellow ; delays are dangerous !’ and with the bantering courtesy peculiar to him, he held the door open for Shelton to pass out. ‘ I think we’ll part here,’ he said—‘ I almost think so. Good luck to you !’

He held out his dry, yellow hand. Shelton seized it, wrung it hard, and muttered the word :

‘ Grateful !’

Again Mr. Dennant’s eyebrows quivered as if they had been tweaked by an invisible check-string ; he saw that he had been found out, and he disliked it. The redness had quite died out of his cheeks ; they were calm, wrinkled, dead-looking under the flattened, narrow brim of his black hat ; his gray moustache drooped in a thin, cynical line ; the crow’s-feet hardened in pencillings about his eyes ; his nostrils were distended ; his face wore the ghost of a smile :

‘ Gratitude !’ he said ; ‘ it’s almost a vice, isn’t it ? Good-night !’

Shelton’s face quivered too ; he raised his hat, and, turning as abruptly as his senior, proceeded on his way towards Oxford. He recognised the fact that he had played a part in a comedy that could only have been played in England, and smiled as he went. He could afford to smile at his past discomfort, having no longer the sense of a duty unfulfilled. Everything had been

said that was right and proper to be said in the way that was right and proper such things should be said. No violence had been done to his instincts, and he could afford to smile—smile at those instincts, smile at Mr. Dennant, smile at to-morrow (for, once away from Antonia's presence, all the strange misgivings of the afternoon had vanished), smile at the sweet, clean aroma of the earth after rain, the shy, unwilling sweetness that only rain brings forth.

CHAPTER XXII

THE COUNTRY HOUSE

THE luncheon hour at Holm Oaks, as in many well-bred country houses out of the shooting season, was the hour of its soul. The ferment of the day's occupations was then at full swing, and the clamour of that perpetual country-house conversation about the weather, dogs, horses, neighbours, cricket, and golf, was mingled with an occasional literary murmur; for the Dennants were superior people, and it was not unfrequent to hear at their table such a query as, 'Have you read that charmin' thing of Boniface Poser's?' or, 'Yes, I've got the new edition of "Bablington"; delightfully bound —so light.' And it was in July that Holm Oaks, as a gathering-place of the elect, was seen at its best. For in July it had become customary to welcome there many of those poor people from London who arrived exhausted after the season was over, and than whom no seamstress in a two-pair back could better have earned her holiday. The Dennants themselves never went to London for the season. It was part of their creed not to. A week or a fortnight at Brewer's Hotel satisfied them. They had a radical weakness for fresh air, and Antonia, after her presentation the season before, had insisted on returning home, stigmatizing London balls as 'stuffy things.'

When Shelton arrived the stream had only just begun, but every day brought fresh, or rather jaded, people to occupy the old, dark, sweet-smelling bedrooms. Individually he liked his fellow-guests very well, but he found himself observing them. He knew that, if a man judged people singly, almost all were as good, or better, than himself; only when judged in the bulk were they worthy of the sweeping criticisms he sometimes felt inclined to pass upon them. He knew this just as he knew that conventions, being invented to restrain people from following their natural desires, were merely the disapproving sums of innumerable private approvals, or just as he recognised that everyone at heart sympathized with the sinner.

It was in the bulk, then, that he found himself observing his fellow-guests.

With his amiability and dread of seeming conspicuous, he remained to all appearance a perfectly well-bred, docile creature, and his independent impressions were naturally kept to himself. The plethoric state of the household, which curtailed his opportunities of being alone with Antonia, annoyed him, and assisted his captiousness, while the state of emotional excitement in which he was living rendered him impatient of that plethoric state of the emotions known as 'good form.'

In the matter of intellect he made a rough division of the company into those who accepted things without a murmur, and those who accepted them with a certain jocular carping; in the matter of morals he found that they all accepted things without the semblance of a kick. To show any signs of private moral judgment was to be regarded as a lost soul, and a bit of an out-

sider. This struck him forcibly, but he gathered the knowledge by intuition rather than from conversation ; for conversation naturally tabooed such questions, and was carried on in the cheerful, loud, unashamed tones peculiar to people of the best breeding. Shelton had never been able to acquire this tone, and he could not help feeling that the inability made him more or less an object of suspicion. The atmosphere of sublime contentment around struck him as it had never struck him before, causing him at times to feel a doubt of his own gentility. Could a man suffer from passion, heart-searchings, misgivings of any kind, and remain a gentleman ? In view of the decisive urbanity which hemet at breakfast, at lunch, at dinner, it seemed improbable. One of his fellow-guests, a man called Edgbaston, small-eyed and semi-bald, with a dark moustache and an air of distinguished meanness, disconcerted him one day by a remark about an unknown person. ‘He looked at me,’ said this gentleman, ‘in the way, don’t you know, that an underbred person looks at one—a sort of half-fear, don’t you know.’

Shelton was visited by a horrid doubt. He glared darkly at Edgbaston.

Everything seemed ringed off into classes, carefully docketed and valued. For instance, a Briton was worth more than a man, a wife than a woman, and so on. Those things or phases of life with which people had no personal acquaintance were regarded with a faint amusement and a certain amount of disapprcval. The principles of the upper classes, in fact, were strictly observed—those principles which had caused Shelton himself, when visiting the Earl’s Court Exhibition, to spend half his time in remarking : ‘ What extraordinary

people there are here ! So smart ! It's really *rather* funny, isn't it ?' and similar flights of irony.

He was in that hypersensitive, nervously repressed state favourable for recording the phases and characteristics most foreign to itself. Things he had never noticed before now had a profound effect, such as the tone adopted by men in speaking of women—not precisely a tone of hostility, nor exactly a tone of contempt—best described, perhaps, as a peculiar, cultured jeering ; never noticeable, of course, when a man spoke of his own wife, mother, sisters, or those of his immediate friends, but merely when he spoke of the rest of women. When he came to reflect upon this he was surprised that he had never remarked before that, amongst the upper classes, each individual gentleman's property was holy, while the rest of women were created to supply him with gossip, jests, and spice. Another thing that struck him was the way in which a war, then in progress, was made into an affair of class. The view taken was that it was a baddish business, because poor Jack Blank and Peter Blank-Blank had lost their lives, and poor Teddy had now one arm instead of two. Humanity in general was omitted, but not the upper classes, nor, incidentally, the country which belonged to them. They were as if seated in a row, with their eyes fixed on the horizon of their own lawns.

Late one evening, when billiards and music were over and the ladies had gone, Shelton, with a flat candlestick in his hand, returned from changing into his smoking-suit, and dropped into one of the great armchairs that even in summer made a respectful semicircle round the high-fendered fireplace. Fresh from the emotion of his good-night parting with Antonia,

he sat perhaps ten minutes before he even began to take in the figures in parti-coloured smoking-jackets, cross-legged, with glasses in their hands and cigars between their teeth.

The man in the next chair roused him by putting down his tumbler with a smart tap, and seating himself on the cushioned fender. Through the mist of smoke, with his shoulders hunched, his elbows and knees rigidly crooked out, his cigar protruding, beak-fashion, below his nose, and the crimson collar of his smoking-jacket buttoned close as plumage on his breast, he presented the appearance of a gorgeous bird.

'Yes, they do you awfully well there,' he said.

A voice from the chair on Shelton's right answered :

'They do you better at Silverado's ;' and the speaker's ascetic, clean-shaven cheeks resumed their greedy sucking at a pipe.

'What! The Veau d'Or's the best place ; they give you Turkish baths for nothing !' drawled a fat man with a tiny mouth entirely occupied by a cigar.

The deliberate suavity of this pronouncement enveloped the company like a blessing. And at once, as if by magic, in the old padded and oak-panelled room, where the only noise was the sound of voices pitched in the same flat key, the world fell naturally into its proper departments : that where they do you well, that where they do you better, and that where they give you Turkish baths for nothing.

'If you want Turkish baths,' said the voice of a tall youth with a clean red face, who had just come into the room, and stood filling his pipe, his mouth a little open and long feet jutting with a sort of sweet helplessness in front of him—'if you want Turkish baths you should

go, don't you know, to Buda Pesth ; they're most awfully rippin' there.'

Shelton saw a subtle and indescribable appreciation on every face, as though they had been offered truffles or something equally delicious.

'Oh yes ; we know all about that, Poodles,' said the man seated on the fender, 'but a Johnnie I know tells me they're nothing to Sofia.' And most quaint was the expression of his countenance ; it had the peculiar decency, the peculiar gloating safety, of a man who enjoys vice by proxy.

'Ah !' drawled the small-mouthed man—he laughed fatly, and his large body stirred—'there's nothing fit to hold a candle to Baghda-ad.'

Once again his utterance enveloped the room as with a blessing, and once again the world fell into its three proper proportions : that where they do you well, that where they do you better, and—Baghdad.

Shelton thought to himself : 'Why don't I know a place that's better than Baghdad ?'

He felt terribly insignificant. It seemed that he never knew any of these delectable spots ; that he was no good to his fellow-creatures, though privately he was convinced that the speakers had no more knowledge than himself, but found it warming to recall things of this sort which they had been told, preserving on the face the while that indescribable mingled look of decency and relish. No ; he felt with a sense of shame that he had no memory for those anecdotes which constitute the prize merit of persons in society, and acquire them the label of 'good chaps' and 'sportsmen.'

He looked round.

'Have you ever been in Baghdad?' he asked feebly.

But the fat man did not answer; he had begun an anecdote, and in the broad expanse of his face his tiny mouth writhed like a caterpillar beneath his short nose. It was a humorous anecdote. Nobody answered; all were too busy recalling anecdotes of their own.

With the exception of Antonia, he saw but little of the ladies, for, following the well-known peculiarity of country-house life, men and women avoided each other carefully. They met at meals, it is true, and occasionally played tennis and croquet together; with these exceptions there seemed a tacit agreement (almost worthy of Orientals) that they were better apart.

But chancing one day to enter the drawing-room in search of Antonia, he found himself suddenly in the middle of a feminine discussion; he would have beaten a hasty retreat of course, but it seemed too obvious that he was merely looking for his fiancée, so, sitting down, he listened.

The Honourable Charlotte Penguin, still knitting a red silk tie—the sixth since the one she had begun at Hyères—sat on the low window-seat close to a hydrangea in a blue china receptacle, the petals of one round flower almost kissing her sanguine cheek. Her eyes were fixed with the languid aspiration characteristic of them upon the lady who was speaking, a square woman of medium height, with gray, scraggly hair brushed off her low forehead, the expression of whose face was brisk, energetic, and rather cross. This lady was standing with a book in her hand, as if delivering a sermon. Had she been a man she would have been best described as a bright young man of business; for though gray, she could never be old, nor ever lose the power of forming

quick decisions. Her features were nondescript, her eyes prompt and slightly hard, tinged with a fanatical belief in the justice of her own judgments, and she had the peculiar fussy simplicity of dress which indicates the right to meddle. Not red, not white, neither yellow nor blue, her complexion was suffused with a certain admixture of all these colours, adapted, as it were, to the climate; and her smile had a strange, sour sweetness, like nothing but the flavour of an apple on the turn.

'I don't care what they tell you,' she was saying—her voice grated, not offensively; it seemed to imply that she had not time to waste in mere pleasing—'in all my dealings with them I've found it best to treat them like children.'

A third lady, with the *Times* newspaper in her hand, smiled; the expression of her mouth, and that, indeed, of her whole handsome, hard-cut face, was wickedly reminiscent of the expression of those dappled rocking-horses which used to come from the Soho Bazaar. She crossed her feet, and some rich and silken stuff rustled. Her whole personality creaked as, without looking up, she replied in a harsh voice:

'I find the poor most delightful persons.'

Sybil Dennant, seated on the sofa, suddenly shot a barking fox-terrier in the direction of Shelton.

'Here's Dick,' she said, with a feathery laugh.
'Well, Dick, what's *your* opinion?'

Shelton gave a scared glance around. They—that is, the two elder ladies who had spoken—were looking at him, and in their glances he read his utter insignificance. 'Expect a practical opinion from that young man!' they seemed to say. 'Now, come!'

'Opinion,' he stammered, 'of the poor? Good g-gracious! I haven't any.'

The lady on her feet, whose name was Mrs. Mattock, paid no attention to this remark, but, directing her peculiar sweet-sour smile at the distinguished and hard-featured lady with the *Times*, said:

'Perhaps you've not had experience of them in London, Lady Bonington?'

Lady Bonington rustled the *Times*.

'Oh, do tell us about the slums, Mrs. Mattock!' cried Sybil. 'Slumming must be splendid! It's so deadly here—nothing but flannel petticoats.'

'The poor, my dear,' began Mrs. Mattock, 'are not in the least what you think them—'

'Oh, d'you know, I think they're *rather* nice!' broke in Aunt Charlotte from beside the hydrangea.

'You think so?' said Mrs. Mattock sharply. 'I find they do nothing but grumble.'

'They don't grumble at me; they are delightful persons;' and Lady Bonington gave Shelton a grim smile.

He could not help thinking that to grumble in the presence of that rich and despotic personality would require superhuman courage.

'They're the most ungrateful people on the face of the earth,' resumed Mrs. Mattock. 'Why, then,' thought Shelton, 'does she try to do anything for them?' But he was conscious of the futility of the question almost before she continued: 'One *must* do them good, one *must* do one's duty, but as to expecting thanks—'

Lady Bonington uttered a sardonic formula:

'Poor things! they have a lot to bear;' and Shelton

could not determine whether or no she intended a sarcasm, for Sybil Dennant again threw the fox-terrier forward, who again barked.

'The little children!' murmured Aunt Charlotte from beside the hydrangea, her cheek flushing, her eyes shining; '*it's rather* pathetic.'

'The children indeed!' said Mrs. Mattock. 'It puts me out of all patience to see the way they neglect them. People are so sentimental about the poor.'

Lady Bonington again rustled the *Times*. Her splendid shoulders were firmly wedged into the arm-chair; her fine hair, gleaming with silver, sprang commandingly back on either side of her brow; a ruby bracelet glowed richly on the powerful wrist that held the journal; she rocked her bronze-slipped foot. She did not appear exactly to lend herself to the charge of sentimentalism.

'I know they often have a very good time,' commented Mrs. Mattock, as if someone had done her a severe and unmerited injury. And Shelton saw, not without pity, how her kind and squashed-up face had been powdered by Fate with wrinkles; how each tiny furrow was eloquent of the best intentions thwarted by the unpractical and discontented poor. 'Do what you will,' she continued, 'I defy you to satisfy them; they only resent one's trying to help, or else take the help and give you no thanks.'

'Oh!' murmured Aunt Charlotte, '*that's rather* hard.'

Shelton had been growing momentarily more uneasy. He rose, and said abruptly:

'I should do the same if I were in their place.'

Mrs. Mattock's brown eyes at once flew at him with

that decisive glance which seemed to docket the person upon whom it rested. Lady Bonington's flat, harsh voice spoke into the *Times*, while her ruby bracelet jingled against a bangle:

'Exactly; we ought to put ourselves in their place.'

Shelton could not restrain a grin; the notion of Lady Bonington in the place of the poor was funny.

'Oh!' exclaimed Mrs. Mattock angrily, 'I do put myself entirely in their place. I quite understand their feelings. But ingratitude is a repulsive quality.'

'They seem unable to put themselves in *your* place,' murmured Shelton; and in a fit of desperate courage he took in the room and its occupants with a sweeping glance.

That room had a remarkable and almost fatal consistency, an air of perfectly fresh and thoroughly characteristic second-handness, as if every picture that hung on the walls, every piece of furniture, every book, every lady present, had been made from patterns. They were all different, had appearances widely dissimilar, yet all (like objects of art one sees in some exhibitions) had a look of having been turned out *after* the designs of some original spirit. The whole room had that chaste, restrained, derivative look, practical and essentially comfortable, of an existence which neither in virtue nor in work, neither in manner, thought, appearance, nor in theory, could—give itself away.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE STAINED-GLASS MAN

CONTINUING his search for Antonia, Shelton went up to the morning-room. Thea Dennant and a girl friend were seated in the window, talking. From the look they gave him he saw that it would have been better for him never to have been born ; he hastily withdrew. Descending to the hall again, he surprised Mr. Dennant crossing to his study, with a satirical and blighted appearance and a handful of official-looking papers.

‘Ah, Shelton !’ said he, ‘you look a little lost. Is the shrine invisible ?’

Shelton grinned spasmodically, said ‘Yes,’ and continued his search. But he was not fortunate. In the dining-room sat Mrs. Dennant, making up her list of library books.

‘Do give me your opinion, Dick,’ she said. ‘Everybody’s readin’ this thing of Katherine Asterick’s ; I believe it’s simply because she’s got a title.’

‘One must read a book for some reason or other,’ replied Shelton.

‘Well,’ returned Mrs. Dennant, ‘I hate doin’ things just because other people do them, and I shan’t get it.’

‘Good !’ said Shelton.

Mrs. Dennant failed to perceive the irony in his tone ; she was marking the catalogue.

'Here's this new book of Linseed's, of course ; though I must say I don't care for him, I suppose we ought to have that. And there's a thing out by Quality, "The Splendid Diatribes" ; that's sure to be good, he's always so refined. But what am I to do about Arthur Baal's last ? It's the fashion to say he's a charlatan, but everybody reads him, don't you know ;' and over the top of the catalogue those hare-like eyes gazed up at Shelton, more hare-like than ever.

The decisive look of her face, with its arched nose and slightly sloping chin, had vanished, blurred by the fog of an unpractical subject, as though someone had appealed to her all of a sudden to trust her own instincts. It was pathetic. Still, there was always the book's circulation to go by.

'I think I'd better mark it, don't you ?' she said. 'Were you lookin' for Antonia ? If you come across Bunyan in the garden, Dick, do say that I want to see him ; he's gettin' a perfect nuisance. I can understand his feelin's, of course, but he's really carryin' it too far altogether.'

Primed with this message to the under-gardener, Shelton retired. Before prosecuting his search out of doors, he took a despairing look at the billiard-room. Antonia was not there. But instead a tall, fat-cheeked gentleman with a neat little moustache, called Mabbey, was practising the spot-stroke at the lower end of the table. He paused as Shelton opened the door, and, pouting like a large baby, asked in a somnolent voice :

'Will you play me a hundred up ?'

Shelton advanced a step irresolutely, shook his head

stammered that he was sorry, and was about to withdraw.

The gentleman called Mabbey, plaintively feeling the spot where his moustache joined a pink and glossy cheek, asked with an air of some surprise :

‘What’s your general game, then?’

Shelton felt annoyed.

‘I really don’t know,’ he said.

The gentleman called Mabbey chalked his cue, and, moving his round, knock-kneed legs twice in their tight trousers to take up position for his stroke, paused for a second before holing the red.

‘I say, what price that?’ he remarked, as he recovered the perpendicular, and his well-fed eyes followed Shelton with sleepy curiosity. ‘Curious dark horse, Shelton,’ they seemed to say.

Shelton hurried out into the garden, and was about to run down to the lower lawn, when he was accosted by another gentleman walking in the sunshine in front of the house—a slight-built man in a turned-down collar, with a thin, fair moustache, and a faint bluish tint on one side of his high forehead, caused by a network of tiny veins. His face had something of the youthful, ironically optimistic, stained-glass look peculiar to the refined English type. He walked buoyantly, yet with trim precision, as if he had a nice taste in furniture and churches, and he held in his hand the *Spectator*.

‘Ah, Shelton!’ he said in a high-toned, pleasant voice—and pausing a second, he slightly bent his advanced leg in such an easy attitude that it was impossible to interrupt it: ‘come out to take the air?’

Shelton found himself pacing leisurely in his company. His brown face, nondescript nose, and the

amiable doggedness of his chin contrasted curiously with the clear features of the stained-glass man.

'I hear from Halidome that you're going to stand for Parliament,' said the latter.

Shelton was startled, but suddenly recalling Halidome's urbane and autocratic manner of settling other people's business, he smiled.

'Do I look like it?' he asked.

The stained-glass man's eyebrows quivered. It had never occurred to him, perhaps, that to stand for Parliament a man must look like it; he really examined Shelton with curiosity.

'Ah, well,' he said, 'now you mention it, perhaps not.' The habitual gleam of carefully-trained irony in his light-blue eyes inspired an idea of profound shallowness, but in spite of their dissimilarity from the eyes of the gentleman called Mabbey, they, too, seemed to ask Shelton what sort of a dark horse he was.

'You're still in the Domestic Office?' said the latter.

The stained-glass man stopped to sniff at a rose-bush.

'Yes,' he replied; 'it suits me very well. I get lots of time for my art work.'

'That must be very interesting,' said Shelton, whose glance was roving for signs of Antonia; 'I never managed to have a hobby myself.'

'Never had a hobby!' said the stained-glass man, and he brushed back his hair (he was walking without a hat); 'why, what the deuce do you do with yourself?'

Shelton couldn't answer this question; the idea had never occurred to him.

'I really don't know,' he said, embarrassed; 'there's always something going on, as far as I can make out.'

The stained-glass man returned his hands to his

pockets, and his bright glance swept inquisitively over his companion.

'A fellow *must* have a hobby to give him an interest in life,' said he.

'An interest in life?' returned Shelton rather grimly; 'life itself's good enough for me.'

A cold look passed on to the face of his companion, as though he disapproved of the practice of regarding life itself as interesting.

'That's all very well,' he said, 'but you want something more than that. Why don't you take up wood-carving?'

'Wood-carving?' repeated Shelton.

'The moment I get fagged with office papers and that sort of thing I take up my wood-carving; it's as good as a game of hockey.'

'No, thanks; I haven't the enthusiasm.'

The eyebrows of the stained-glass man arched; he twisted his moustache delicately; there was a reprehensible mordancy in Shelton's voice.

'You'll find it doesn't pay, not having a hobby,' he said; 'you'll get old, and then where'll you be?'

Shelton squinted at him; it came somehow as a surprise that the other should use the words 'it doesn't pay,' for he had a kind of partially enamelled look, like one of those pieces of modern jewellery which really seem so modestly unconscious of their market value.

'You've given up the Bar, haven't you? Don't you get awfully bored having nothing to do?' abruptly pursued the stained-glass man, stopping before an old sundial and eyeing it carefully.

Shelton felt a delicacy, as a man naturally would, in explaining that being in love was in itself a pursuit

occupying more than all his time. He did not know what to say. To have nothing to do is unworthy of a man—he knew that. The odd thing was that he had never felt as if he had nothing to do. He said nothing. But his silence in no way disconcerted his acquaintance.

‘That’s a nice old article of virtue,’ he said, pointing delicately with his chin at the sundial, as if it had been an elderly maiden lady ; and walking round, he examined it attentively from the other side. Its gray profile cast a thin, shortening shadow on the turf ; tongues of moss were licking at its sides ; the daisies clustered thick round its base, and it had acquired a look of growing from the soil. ‘I should like to get hold of that,’ said the stained-glass man ; ‘I don’t know when I’ve seen a better specimen ;’ and he walked round it a second time.

His eyebrows were still arched with their professional irony, but below them his eyes had a curious look, almost calculating, and below them, again, his mouth had opened a little, and the lower lip had taken a curl. A person with a keener eye would have said that the face looked greedy, and even Shelton was faintly surprised, as though he had read in the *Spectator* a confession of commercialism.

‘You couldn’t root a thing like that up,’ said he ; ‘it would lose all its charm.’

His companion half turned his eyes with a gleam of impatient contempt, and his countenance looked all of a sudden surprisingly genuine.

‘Couldn’t I ?’ he said, stooping down. ‘By Jove ! 1690 ; I thought so. The best period.’ He raised himself, and ran his finger along the edge of the sundial. ‘What a splendid line!—as clean as the day it

was made. You don't seem to care much about that sort of thing ;' and once again, as though accustomed to the indifference of Vandals, his face regained its mask.

They strolled on in the direction of the kitchen gardens, Shelton still busy sweeping every patch of shade for Antonia. He had a longing to say 'I can't stop,' and dash off on his search ; but there was something about the stained-glass man that, while stinging and sharpening his feelings, made it peculiarly abhorrent to him to show them. 'Feelings !' that personality seemed to say, 'yes ; that's all very well, but you want something more than that. Why not take up wood-carving ? . . . Feelings ! I was born in England, and educated at Cambridge.'

'Are you staying here long ?' he asked of Shelton. 'I go on to Halidome's to-morrow ; suppose I shan't see you there ? What a good chap, old Halidome ! Wonderful collection of etchings !'

'No ; I'm staying on here,' replied Shelton.

'Ah !' said the stained-glass man, 'very charming people, the Dennants !'

Shelton reddened slowly, turning his head away ; he picked a gooseberry, and muttered 'Yes.'

'The eldest girl especially ; there's no nonsense about her. I thought she was a particularly nice girl.'

Shelton heard this praise of Antonia with a most odd sensation ; it gave him the reverse of pleasure, as though the words had cast a new light upon her. He grunted hastily :

'I suppose you know I'm engaged to her ?'

'Really !' said the stained-glass man, and again his bright, clear, non-committal glance swept inquisitively

over Shelton—‘really! I didn’t know that. I congratulate you!’

It seemed to Shelton as if he were saying: ‘H’m! you’re a man of taste; I should say she would go well in almost any drawing-room!’ His discomfort found vent in so sardonic a grin that, at sight of it, the other involuntarily threw up his hand, and brushed the hair off his forehead.

‘Thanks,’ said Shelton softly; ‘there she is. If you’ll excuse me, I want to speak to her.’

CHAPTER XXIV

PARADISE

ANTONIA, in a sunny angle of the old brick wall, amid a forest of pinks and poppies, and cornflowers, was humming a tune. Before Shelton reached her, he turned to see that the stained-glass man was no longer in sight, and, unobserved, he watched her plucking and smelling at the flowers, caressing her face with each flower in turn, now and then casting a spoiled blossom to the ground, and all the time, like the bees around her, humming.

It seemed so strange that in a couple of months all barriers between him and this inscrutable young Eve would be broken down ; that she would be a part of him, and he a part of her ; that he would know all that she thought, and she all that he thought ; that together they would stand in the eyes of all respectable people as one person ; that all respectable people would call upon them as *one*, talk of them as *one* ; and that all this would come about by their standing together for half an hour in a church, by the gift of a ring, and the signing of their names.

The sun had burnished her hair, for she wore no hat, flushed her cheeks, sweetened and made sensuous the play of her limbs ; it had warmed her through and

through, so that, like the flowers and the bees, the sun-light and the air, she, too, was all motion, and light, and colour, and perfume.

With her hands full she turned and saw Shelton standing behind her.

'Oh, it's you, Dick!' she said: 'Lend me your handkerchief to put these flowers in, there's a good boy!'

Her fair and candid eyes, blue and unknowable as the flowers in her hands, were like two little pieces of clear ice, but in her smile was reflected the delicious warmth and profusion of that corner; all the sweetness that had soaked into her was welling forth again. The sight of her, with those sun-warmed cheeks, fingers twining among the flower-stalks, pearly teeth, and hair all fragrant, stole the reason out of Shelton. He stood before her, weak about the knees, drunk on the evidence of his senses.

'I've found you at last,' he said.

Her neck curved back over her shoulder, she cried 'Catch!' and with a sweep of both hands flung her flowers into Shelton's arms.

His emotions were whipped by the rain of flowers, all warm and odorous; but, dropping on his knees, he put them together, smelling solemnly at the pinks one by one, and seeking by this mechanical device to hide the violence of his feelings. Antonia went on picking flowers, and every time that her hand was full she bent down to Shelton and dropped them on his hat, or his shoulder, or across his arms, and went on plucking more; and each time that she came near, her smile gleamed, and in her face danced a little provoking devil—one would have said she knew what he was suffering.

And he began to have the feeling that she *did* know. He felt ridiculous kneeling there, so hopelessly in her power, and only restrained by a vague chivalry from clasping her waist and holding her a prisoner.

'Are you tired?' she asked; 'there are heaps more wanted. These are the bedroom flowers—fourteen lots. I can't think how people can live without flowers, can you?' and close above Shelton's head she buried her nose in a bunch of pinks.

Shelton kept his eyes fixed on the growing mass of the plucked flowers before him on the grass. He was afraid, and forced himself to answer:

'I think I can hold out.'

'Poor old Dick!' He looked up, but she had stepped back, and was stooping towards some mignonette. The sun illumined the clear-cut profile of her cheek, and shot gold into the curves of her blouse. 'Poor old Dick! Awfully hard luck, isn't it?' Burdened with mignonette, she came so close to him again that she actually touched his shoulder, but Shelton did not look up this time; breathless, with his heart beating wildly, he went on sullenly sorting the flowers. The dry seeds of the mignonette rained down on his neck, and as she let the blossoms fall, their perfume drifted into his face. 'You needn't sort them,' she said.

She was enticing him! He stole a look, and his eyes, from being angry, grew steadfast and burning; but she was gone again, swaying and sniffing amongst the flowers.

'I suppose I'm only hindering you,' he growled; 'I'd better go.'

She laughed.

'Oh, I like to see you on your knees, you look so

funny!' and as she spoke she flung a clove carnation at him. 'Doesn't it smell good?'

'Too good,' muttered Shelton. 'Oh, Antonia! why do you do it?'

'Why do I do what?' she cried, with icy candour; and Shelton felt as if a cold douche had been poured down his back.

'Don't you know what you're doing?' he murmured.

'Why, picking flowers!' and once more she was back, bending and sniffing amongst the blossoms.

'That's enough.'

'Oh no,' she called; 'it's not—not nearly enough. Keep on sorting them, Dick, if you—love me.'

'You know I love you,' answered Shelton, in a smothered voice.

Antonia stopped her plucking for a moment, and gazed at him across her shoulder; there was something inquiring and puzzled in her face. He shivered, perhaps from the strain of remaining so long upon his knees.

'I'm not a bit like you, you know, Dick,' she said, and began plucking sweet peas. 'What will you have for your room?'

'Choose!' he answered.

'Cornflowers and clove pinks. Poppies are too frivolous, and white pinks are too—too—'

'White,' said Shelton.

'And mignonette too hard and—'

'Sweet,' muttered Shelton. 'But why corn-flowers?'

Antonia stood before him with her hands flat against her sides; there was a touch of pathos in the slim,

young figure, and a touch of uncertainty in her grave face.

‘Because they’re dark and deep.’

‘And why clove pinks?’

But Antonia did not answer.

‘And why clove pinks?’ repeated Shelton.

‘Because,’ said Antonia, flushing, and touching a bee that had settled on her skirt, ‘perhaps—because of something in you that I don’t understand.’

‘Ah!’ he said, burying his nose in the clove pink.

‘And what flowers shall I give *you*?’

She put her hands behind her, and her upper teeth showed in a smile.

‘There are all the other flowers for me.’

Shelton snatched up from the mass in front of him a pink poppy with a straight stem and a curve in the neck, banked it up with white pinks and sprigs of hard, sweet mignonette, and struggling off his knees, held it out to her.

‘There, I’ve got you!’ he said.

But Antonia did not move.

‘Oh no, you haven’t!’ and behind her back her fingers slowly crushed the petals of a blood-red poppy. She shook her head, a brilliant smile on her lips; then, with eyes fixed on the flowers he was holding out, she stood before him like a temptation. The blossoms fell from his hand, he flung his arms round her, and kissed her passionately on her smiling lips.

But the next moment his hands dropped to his sides, and not fear exactly, nor exactly shame, overwhelmed him. She had not resisted, but he had kissed the smile off her lips; he had kissed a strange, cold, frightened look into her eyes.

'She didn't mean to tempt me,' he thought, in a whirl of shame, surprise, and anger. 'What *did* she mean? I'm not made of cottonwool;' and like a scolded dog, he kept his intent and troubled watch upon her face.

CHAPTER XXV

THE RIDE

'WHERE now?' asked Antonia, as they turned their horses round in the High Street of Oxford City. 'I won't go back the same way, Dick!'

'We could have a gallop on Port Meadow, cross the Upper River twice, and get home that way; but you'll be tired.'

Antonia shook her head. She was riding a chestnut mare. Aslant of her flushed cheek the brim of her straw hat drew a curve of shade, and her ear glowed transparent and rosy in the sun.

Since that kiss a strange difference had come in their relations; outwardly she was the same comrade-like girl, with the same cool vitality and the same quick decisions. But as before a change one feels the subtle difference in the quality of a wind, so Shelton's perceptions were affected by the inner change in her. He had scored a mark on her candid surface; rubbed it out with the most tender care, but left all the same an ineffaceable roughness in the fibre of the parchment. He had let himself go, and made an ineffaceable mark; and he knew that Antonia belonged to the most civilized section of the most civilized nation in Europe, whose creed was: 'Let us love and hate, marry and work, but

not commit ourselves ; to commit ourselves is to leave an ineffaceable mark, and that is beyond forgiveness. Let our lives be like our faces, free from every kind of wrinkle, even those of laughter ; in this way we shall be saved.'

And he felt that she was ruffled by the vague discomfort of an injury. That he should have committed himself had made her wonder, but that he should give her the feeling that *she* had committed herself was clearly more serious altogether.

'Do you mind if I just ask at the Bishop's Head for letters ?' he said, as they passed the old hotel.

A dirty and very thin envelope was brought out to him addressed 'Mr. Richard Shelton, Esq.,' in an ornamental, passionately distinct handwriting, as though the writer had put his soul into securing the delivery of the letter. It was dated three days back, and, opening it as they rode away, Shelton read as follows :

'IMPERIAL PEACOCK HOTEL,
'FOLKESTONE.

'MON CHER MONSIEUR SHELTON,

'This is already the third time I have taken up pen to write to you, but, having nothing but misfortune to recount, I hesitated, awaiting better days. Indeed, I have been so profoundly discouraged that if I had not thought it my duty to let you know of my fortunes I know not even now if I should have found the necessary spirit. *Les choses vont de mal en mal.* From what I hear there has never been such a bad season here. Nothing going on. All the same, I am tormented by an infinity of affairs which bring me not enough to support life. I know not what I shall do, but one thing

is certain, in no case shall I return here another year. The patron of this hotel, my good employer, is one of those innumerable specimens who do not forge or steal because they have no need, and if they had would lack the courage ; who observe the marriage laws because they have been brought up to believe in them, and know that breaking them brings danger and loss of reputation ; who do not gamble because they dare not ; do not drink because it disagrees with them ; go to church because of their neighbours, and to procure an appetite for the mid-day meal ; commit no murder because, not transgressing in any other fashion, they are not obliged. What is there to respect in such persons ? And yet they are highly esteemed, and form three-quarters of Society. The rule with these gentlemen is to shut their eyes, never use their thinking powers, and close the door on all the dogs of life for fear they should get bitten.'

Shelton paused, for he had become conscious of Antonia's eyes fixed on him with the unknowable gleam that he had begun to dread. In that chilly questioning of her spirit there was nothing really mysterious nor anything really inquisitive—in fact, there was a certain quality of obviousness. 'I am prepared to be told things,' she seemed to be saying ; 'that is, useful things—things that help one to believe without thinking.'

He shifted the letter from one hand to the other.

'It's from that young foreigner,' he said ; and went on reading to himself.

'I have eyes, and here I am ; I have a nose *pour flairer le humbug*. I see that amongst the value of things nothing is worth as much as free thought. Everything

else they can take from you, *on ne peut pas vous ôter cela !* I see no future for me here, and certainly should have left long ago if I had had the money; but as I have already told you, all that I can do barely suffices to procure me *de quoi vivre*. *Je me sens écœuré*. Do not pay too much attention to my Jeremiads; you know what a pessimist I am. *Je ne perds pas courage.*

‘Hoping that you are well, and cordially pressing your hand,

‘Your very devoted
‘LOUIS FERRAND.’

He remained with the letter open in his hand, frowning, resenting the curious turmoil which any intrusion of Ferrand aroused. It was as though the young foreigner had the power to twang within him a neglected string, which gave forth a mutinous moan, like the tattoo of the unemployed’s drum.

‘Well, what does he say?’ asked Antonia.

Should he show it to her? If he might not, what should he do when they were married? He held the letter tightly.

‘I don’t quite know,’ he said at last; ‘it’s not very cheering.’

‘What is he like, Dick—I mean, to look at? Like a gentleman, or what?’

Shelton stifled an impulse to laugh.

‘He looks very well in a frock-coat,’ he replied, ‘and his father was a wine merchant.’

Antonia flicked her skirt with her riding-whip.

‘Of course,’ she murmured, ‘I don’t want to hear if there’s anything I ought not.’

Oddly enough, instead of allaying Shelton’s discomfort

the words had the opposite effect. His temperament disagreed with the conception of the ideal wife as a person from whom the half of life must be excluded.

'It's only,' he stammered again, 'that it's not very cheerful.'

'Oh, all right!' she cried, and, smartly touching her horse, flew off in front. 'I hate dismal things.'

Shelton bit his lips. It was not his fault that the world held a dark side. He knew that her words were loosed against something in himself, and, as always at a sign of her displeasure, he was afraid. He galloped after her across the scorched turf of Port Meadow.

'What is it?' he said, as he came alongside. 'You're angry with me!'

'Oh no!'

'Darling, I can't help it if things are not cheerful. I have eyes,' he added, unconsciously quoting from the letter.

Antonia did not look at him, and again touched her horse.

'Well, I don't want to see gloomy things,' she said breathlessly, 'and I can't see why *you* should. It's wicked to be discontented;' and she galloped off again.

He was ruffled. It was not his fault that there were a thousand different kinds of human beings, a thousand different points of view, outside the fence of her bringing-up! 'What business,' he thought, digging the dummy rowels of his spurs into his horse's sides and following, 'has our class to turn up its nose at the rest of the world? We're the only people who haven't an idea what life really means.' But the chase began to excite him; chips of dried turf and dust came flying back and stinging his face. He gained on her, drew

almost within reach of her rein, then, as though she had been playing with him, was hopelessly left behind.

She stopped under the far hedge, fanning herself with a dock-leaf, and her face glowed with triumph.

‘Aha, Dick!’ she said, ‘I knew you’d never catch me;’ and she drew a gloved hand down the crest of the chestnut mare, who turned her blowing muzzle with good-humoured contempt towards Shelton’s steed, while her flanks heaved rapturously, and gradually darkened with sweat.

‘No,’ grunted Shelton, getting off and loosening his girths; ‘we’d better take them steadily if we mean to get home at all.’

‘Don’t be cross, Dick!’

‘We oughtn’t to have galloped them like this; they’re not in condition. If you take my advice, you’ll go back the way we came.’

Antonia dropped the reins, and straightened her back hair.

‘There’s no fun in that,’ she said, looking straight before her. ‘Out and back again; I hate a dog’s walk.’

‘Very well,’ said Shelton; he would have her longer to himself!

The road led up an interminable hill, and from the top, a vision of Saxonia, as unshakable and complacent as the sides of a Berkshire pig, lay, wooded and fat, before their eyes. Their way branched down into an ungated glade, and Shelton sidled up till his knee touched the mare’s off-flank.

Antonia’s profile had a quality that conjured delightful visions. She was like a statue of Youth; her eyes tantalized in their brilliant innocence, her cheeks glowed, her brow was unruffled, but in the curve of her

smile and the set of her chin lurked something resolute and mischievous. Shelton put his hand on the mare's mane.

'I can't think what made you promise to marry me,' he said gently.

She smiled.

'And what made *you*?'

'I?' cried Shelton.

She slipped her hand into his.

'Oh, Dick!' she said, 'I wish——'

'I wish,' he stammered, taking the words out of her mouth, 'to be everything to you. Do you think I shall?'

'After we are married?' she asked, and quickly, in her clear voice, added: 'Of course!'

'Of course!' he repeated. The words seemed too much or too little.

'Dick,' she cried, looking straight before her, where the river gleamed at the end of the glade in a curving line of silver, 'there are such a lot of splendid things we might do.'

Did she mean amongst those splendid things that they might understand each other, or merely pretend to, with that sacred and stately pretence time-honoured with the best people?

They crossed the river by the horse-ferry, and rode a long time in silence, while the twilight slowly gathered behind the aspens. To Shelton all the beauty of the evening, with its restless leaves, grave young moon, and lighted campion flowers, was but a part of her; the scents, the witchery and shadows, the quaint field noises, a yokel's whistle, and the splash of water-fowl, each seemed to him enchanted. The flighting bats, the

dim hayricks, the spring of his horse beneath him, the scent of the sweet-briar—she seemed to sum them all up in herself. The finger-marks had deepened under her eyes, a languor had come upon her, which only made her the more youthful, the more precious, sweet, and sane. To him her young shoulders bore upon them the very image of our land—grave and aspiring, eager yet contained—before there had come upon that land the wrinkles of greed, the folds of wealth, dimples of luxury, or the simper of content. Fair, unconscious, and free! He was silent, with straining eyes and twitching hands, with a beating heart, and fierce longing within it.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE BIRD OF PASSAGE

THAT night, after the ride, Shelton was taking the things from his pockets before going to bed, when his eyes fell on Ferrand's letter, and with a sleepy sense of duty he began reading it a second time. In the dark-panelled bedroom, his four-poster, with back of crimson damask and dainty sheets, was lighted by the candle glow; the copper pitcher of hot water in the basin, the backs of his brushes, the line of his well-polished boots, all shone tenderly, and Shelton's face alone was gloomy, as he stared at the neat characters on the yellowish paper in his hand.

'The poor beggar wants money, of course,' he thought. Why should he go on helping a fellow who had no claim on him, who was a hopeless case, an incurable—one of those whom it was a duty to let sink for the benefit of the community at large? Ferrand's vagabond refinement had beguiled him into charity that would have been better bestowed on hospitals, or any good work but missionaries. The notion of giving a helping hand, a bit of himself, a ray of fellowship to a fellow-being irrespective of claims, and merely because he was down on his luck, was sentimental nonsense! The line must be drawn! But in the very muttering

of this conclusion he was visited by a twinge of honesty. ‘ You’re a humbug ! ’ he thought ; ‘ you simply don’t want to part with your money ! ’

So he sat down in his shirt-sleeves at his writing-table, and savagely penned the following on paper stamped with the Holm Oaks address and crest :

‘ MY DEAR FERRAND,

‘ I am sorry you are having such a bad spell. You seem to be dead out of luck. I hope by the time you get this things will have changed for the better. I should very much like to see you again and have a talk, but shall be away some time longer, and doubt even when I get back whether I should have time to run down and look you up. Keep me *au courant* as to your movements.

‘ Yours sincerely,

‘ RICHARD SHELTON.’

He intended to enclose a cheque, but a moth fluttering round the candle so distracted his attention that, by the time he had caught it and put it out of the window, he had forgotten not having enclosed the cheque, and the letter, removed with his clothes before he was awake, was posted in this empty condition.

One morning about a week later, while he was sitting in the smoking-room in the company of the gentleman called Mabbey—who was describing to him the number of grouse he had killed on August 12 last year, and the number he intended to kill this year—the door was softly opened, and the butler entered the room, carrying his head as though it were in possession of some fatal secret.

‘ A young man is asking for you, sir,’ said he to

Shelton, with a discreet bend: ‘I don’t know if you would wish to see him, sir.’

‘A young man!’ repeated Shelton; ‘what sort of young man?’

‘I should say a sort of foreigner, sir,’ replied the butler apologetically. ‘He’s wearing a frock-coat, but he looks as if he might have been walking a good deal, sir.’

Shelton rose hastily; there was an ominous ring in the description.

‘Where is he?’ he asked.

‘I put him in the young ladies’ little room, sir.’

‘All right,’ said Shelton; ‘I’ll come and see him. Now, what the deuce!’ he thought, as he ran down the stairs.

It was with a queer mixture of vexation and pleasure that he opened the door of the little room consecrated to the birds, beasts, racquets, golf-clubs, and general litter of the young ladies, and found Ferrand standing impassively beneath the cage of a canary, with his hands folded on his pinched-up brown felt hat, and a nervous smile on his lips. He was dressed in the frock-coat Shelton had given him, tightly buttoned, and cut a presentable figure but for the travel-worn look that pervaded his nondescript personality. He wore a pair of pince-nez, which somewhat veiled the cynicism in his prominent eyes, and clashed with the pagan look that never quite left him. In the midst of the strange surroundings he still preserved that air of being intimate with, and master of, his own fate which was his chief attraction.

‘I’m glad to see you,’ said Shelton, holding out his hand.

'Forgive me this liberty,' began Ferrand, 'but I thought it due to you after all you've done for me not to throw up my efforts to get employment in England without letting you know. I'm entirely at the end of my resources.'

The phrase seemed familiar.

'But I wrote to you,' said Shelton; 'didn't you get my letter?'

A flicker passed over Ferrand's face, and he drew the letter out of his pocket.

'Yes,' he answered, holding it out.

Shelton took the letter and stared at it.

'But,' said he, 'surely I sent you a cheque?'

Ferrand did not smile; there was a look about him as though Shelton had done him an injury in forgetting the cheque.

Shelton could not repress a flash of suspicion.

'Of course,' he said, 'I—I—meant to enclose a cheque!'

Too subtle to speak, the curl of the young foreigner's lip implied: 'I am capable of much, but not of that;' and at once Shelton felt guilty of meanness.

'It was stupid of me,' he said, and was silent.

'I had no intention of intruding myself here,' said Ferrand; 'I hoped to see you in the neighbourhood, but I arrived exhausted with fatigue. I've eaten nothing since yesterday at noon, and walked thirty miles.' He shrugged his shoulders. 'You see, I had no time to lose before assuring myself whether you were here or not.'

'Of course——' began Shelton, and again he did not know how to go on.

'I should very much like,' said the young foreigner,

'for one of your good legislators to find himself in these country villages with a penny in his pocket. In other countries bakers are obliged to sell you an equivalent of bread for a penny; here they won't sell you as much as a crust under twopence. You don't encourage poverty.'

'What is your idea now?' asked Shelton, with the desire to gain time.

'As I told you,' replied Ferrand, 'there's nothing to be done at Folkestone, though I should have stayed there if I had had the money to defray certain expenses;' and again his voice betrayed reproach at Shelton's omission of the cheque. 'They say things will certainly be better at the end of the month. Now that I know English well, I thought perhaps you could procure me a situation for teaching languages.'

'I see,' said Shelton.

As a matter of fact he was far from seeing; he literally did not know what to do. He revolted somehow against the brutality of giving Ferrand money and asking him to clear out; besides, it so happened that he had no money in his pocket.

'It needs some philosophy to support what I've gone through this last week,' said Ferrand, with a shrug of his shoulders. 'On Wednesday last, when I received your letter, I had just eighteenpence, and at once made a resolution to come and see you; on that sum I've done the journey. But I'm nearly at the end of my strength.'

Shelton caressed his chin; the gesture was peculiar to him when thoroughly perplexed.

'Well,' he had just begun, 'we must——' when he saw by the expression of his visitor's face that someone had entered the room behind him. He turned, and found Antonia in the doorway. 'Excuse me a

moment,' he stammered, and going up to Antonia, drew her out of the room.

'Dick,' she said with a smile, 'it's the young foreigner; I'm certain it is! What fun!'

'Yes,' answered Shelton slowly; 'he's come over to see me about getting some sort of tutorship. Do you think your mother would mind if I took him up to have a wash? He's had a—a longish walk. And might he have some breakfast? I fancy he must be hungry.'

'Of course! I'll tell Dobson. Shall I speak to mother? He looks nice, Dick.'

He gave her a grateful, rather furtive look, and went back to his guest; a snobbish impulse had made him disguise from her the true state of the case.

Ferrand was standing where he had been left, and his face had remained impassive, but the blankness of it was more mordant than any expression of mortification; it had dignity.

'Come up to my room!' said Shelton; and while his guest was washing, brushing, and embellishing his person, he stood thinking that Ferrand was really by no means unpresentable, and he felt quite grateful to him.

He took an opportunity, when the young foreigner's back was turned, of examining the counterfoils of his cheque-book. Naturally, there was none drawn in Ferrand's favour! So that he felt more mean than ever.

A message came almost directly from Mrs. Dennant; he took the traveller downstairs to the dining-room and left him there, while he went up to his future mother-in-law. He met Antonia coming down.

'How many days did you say he went without food that time—you know?' she asked in passing.

'Four.'

'He doesn't look a bit common, Dick.'

Shelton gazed at her dubiously.

'Ah,' thought he, in spite of himself, 'they're surely not going to make a show of him!'

Mrs. Dennant was writing, attired in a dark-blue dress with white spots, and a fine lawn collar threaded with black velvet.

'Have you seen the new hybrid Algy's brought me from Kidstone?' she asked. 'Isn't it charmin'?' and she bent her face towards the specimen rose. 'They say it's unique; I'm awfully interested to find out if that's true. Anyway, I've told Algy I really must have some.'

Shelton thought of the unique hybrid breakfasting downstairs; he wished, perhaps, that Mrs. Dennant would manifest as much interest in him as in the rose. But he secretly knew that this was absurd of him, for at the sight of Mrs. Dennant and her rose, he felt somehow all the force of that potent law of hobbies controlling the upper classes, and forcing them to take more interest in birds, roses, missionaries, or limited editions of books (objects, in a word, governed by Societies, and thoroughly exploited in print) than in the untidy manifestations of mere life that came daily before their eyes.

'Oh, Dick, about that young Frenchman. Antonia says he wants a tutorship; now, can you really recommend him? There's Mrs. Robinson at the Gateways wants someone to teach her boys languages; and, if he were quite satisfactory, it's really time Toddles had a few lessons in French; he goes to Eton next half.'

Shelton stared at the rose; he had suddenly realized why it was that people take more interest in roses than

in human beings—one could do it with a quiet heart, without incessant misgivings and shocks to one's senses of propriety and of property.

'He's not a Frenchman, you know,' he said to gain time.

'He's not a German, I hope,' replied Mrs. Dennant, putting her fingers to the edge of one of the petals as though to impress its shape on her brain; 'I don't like Germans. Isn't he the one you wrote about—come down in the world? Such a pity with a young fellow! His father was a merchant, I think you told us. Antonia says he's quite refined lookin'.'

'Oh yes,' said Shelton, glad to be on safe ground; 'he's refined enough looking.'

Mrs. Dennant took the rose from the vase and put it to her nose.

'Delicious perfume!' she said. 'That was a very touchin' story about his goin' without food in Paris. Old Mrs. Hopkins has a room to let in her cottage; I should like to do her a good turn. I'm afraid there's a hole in the ceilin', though. Or there's the room here in the left wing on the ground-floor where John the foot-man used to sleep. It's quite nice; perhaps he could have that.'

'You're awfully kind,' said Shelton, 'but——'

'I should like to do something to restore his self-respect,' went on Mrs. Dennant, 'if, as you say, he's such a clever young fellow. Seein' a little refined life again might make a world of difference to him. It's so sad when a young man loses his self-respect.'

As ever, Shelton was struck by the practical way she looked at things. Restore his self-respect! It seemed a splendid idea! He smiled, and began:

' You're too kind. I——'

' I don't believe in doin' things by halves,' said Mrs. Dennant; ' he doesn't drink, does he ?'

' Oh no,' said Shelton; ' I'm afraid he's a bit of a tobacco maniac, though.'

' Well, that's a mercy ! You wouldn't believe the trouble I've had with drink, especially cooks and coachmen. And now Bunyan has taken to it.'

' Oh, you'd have no trouble with Ferrand,' returned Shelton; ' you couldn't tell him from a gentleman as far as manners go.'

Mrs. Dennant smiled one of her rather sweet, kindly smiles.

' My dear Dick,' she said, ' there's not much comfort in that. Look at poor Bobby Surcingle, look at Oliver Semples and Victor Medallion ; you couldn't have better families. But if you're sure he doesn't drink ! Algy'll laugh, of course, but that doesn't matter ; he laughs at everything.'

Shelton began to feel guilty ; he had not been prepared for so rapid an adoption of his client.

' I really believe there's a lot of good in him,' he stammered; ' but, of course, I know very little, and from what he tells me he's had a very curious life. I shouldn't like——'

' Where was he educated ?' inquired Mrs. Dennant. ' They have no public schools in France, so I've been told ; but, of course, he can't help that, poor young fellow ! Oh ! and, Dick, there's one thing ; has he a lot of relations ? One has always to be so careful about that. It's one thing to help a young fellow, but quite another to help his family too. One sees so many cases of that where men marry girls without money, don't you know.'

'He's told me,' said Shelton, 'that he has no relations nearer than cousins, and they are rich people.'

Mrs. Dennant took out her handkerchief, and, bending over the rose, delicately removed a tiny insect.

'These green-fly get everywhere,' she said. 'It seems a *very* sad story; can't they do anything for him?' and she pursued her researches into the heart of the rose.

'I believe he's quarrelled with them,' said Shelton; 'I haven't liked to press him about that.'

'No, of course not,' assented Mrs. Dennant absently—she had found another green-fly—'I always think it's painful when a young man seems to be so friendless.'

Shelton was silent; he was thinking deeply. Oddly enough, he had never before felt so distrustful of Ferrand.

'I think,' he said at last, 'the best thing would be for you to see him yourself.'

'An excellent suggestion,' said Mrs. Dennant. 'I should be so glad if you would tell him to come up. I must say I do think that was a most touchin' story about Paris. I wonder whether the light's strong enough now for me to photograph this rose.'

Shelton withdrew and went downstairs. Ferrand was still at breakfast. Antonia stood at the sideboard carving cold beef for him, and in the window sat Thea with her Persian kitten.

Both girls were following the traveller's movements with an inscrutable curiosity in their blue eyes that sent a shiver down Shelton's spine. To speak truth, he cursed the arrival of the young foreigner, as though somehow it affected his relations with Antonia.

CHAPTER XXVII

SUB ROSA

IN the interview, which Shelton had the mixed delight of watching, between Ferrand and the Honourable Mrs. Dennant, certain definite results were achieved, the most notable of which was the permission accorded to the young foreigner to occupy the room in the left wing on the ground-floor which had formerly been tenanted by John the footman. Shelton was lost in admiration of Ferrand's manner throughout the palaver. The subtle combination of deference and dignity in his voice and attitudes was almost paralyzing ; paralyzing, too, the subterranean, as it were, smile on his lips.

'A charmin' young man, Dick,' said Mrs. Dennant, when Shelton lingered a moment at the close of the interview with the intention of saying once more that he knew very little about him : 'I shall send a note round to Mrs. Robinson at once. They're rather common, you know—the Robinsons. I think they'll take anyone I recommend.'

'I'm sure they will,' said Shelton ; 'that's why I think you ought to know——'

But Mrs. Dennant's eyes were fixed hare-like and fervent on something beyond, and, turning, he saw the rose, which, in a tall vase on a tall and spindly stool,

seemed to nod condescendingly in the slanting sunshine of the window. She dived her aquiline nose suddenly towards the sighting-glass of her kodak.

'The light's perfect now,' she said, in a muffled, ecstatic voice. 'I feel sure that livin' with refined people will do wonders for him. Of course, he understands that his meals will be served apart.'

Shelton, who could no longer leave Ferrand at loose ends upon the door-mat, retired. He was doubly uneasy now that his efforts had succeeded in lodging Ferrand in a position of trust, but fell back on his faculty of believing the best of people; and an instinct assured him that, vagabond as the young foreigner was, he had a large outlook, a curious self-respect, that would always save him from the meaner sorts of ingratitude.

In fact, as Mrs. Dennant, who was by no means devoid of practical sense, foresaw, the arrangement worked very well. Ferrand entered upon his duties as French tutor to the Robinson boys. In the Dennants' household he kept to his own room, which, day and night, he perfumed with tobacco, emerging at noon into the garden, or, if wet, into the study, to administer a lesson to Toddles. After a time it became customary for him to lunch with the house-party, partly through a mistake of Toddles', who thought apparently that it was natural, and partly through John Noble, one of Shelton's friends, who was staying in the house, and had discovered Ferrand to be a most awfully interesting person—he was always discovering the most awfully interesting persons. In his grave, toneless voice, passing his hand over his brow, he descanted upon Ferrand with an enthusiasm in which was mingled a species of shocked toleration and a spasmodic laugh, as one should

say : ‘ Of course, I know it’s excessively odd, but really he’s a most awfully interesting person.’ Shelton had always held John Noble in affectionate neglect. He was a politician, belonging to that small, kid-gloved Peculiar party, the members of which, thoroughly in earnest, of an honesty above suspicion, and always extremely busy, are yet constitutionally averse to anything peculiar for fear of finding that they have overstepped the limits of practical politics. As such he inspired confidence, possessed a level head, desired salvation—that is, did not care for things unless he saw some practical benefit to be had out of them in this world or the next—had no faculty whatever for leaving things to take care of themselves, a perfect sense of decency, and not enough imagination to cover his thumbnails, which he bit. He got into the habit of discussing all manner of subjects with Ferrand, and on one occasion Shelton overheard them arguing on Anarchism.

‘ No Englishman approves of murder,’ John Noble said, in the gloomy voice that contrasted so strangely with the optimistic cast of his fine head, ‘ but the main principle is all right. Equalization of property is bound to come. I sympathize with *them*, but not with their methods.’

‘ Forgive me,’ struck in Ferrand ; ‘ do you know any Anarchists ?’

‘ No,’ returned Noble ; ‘ I certainly don’t.’

‘ You say that you sympathize with them, but the first time it comes to action——’

‘ Well ?’

‘ Oh, monsieur ! one doesn’t make Anarchism with the head.’

Shelton perceived that he meant to add ‘but with the heart, and the lungs, and the liver.’ Taking no interest in Anarchism, he drew a deeper and more general meaning from the saying, and seemed to see, issuing with the discoloured smoke from Ferrand’s curling lips, the words: ‘What do you, an English gentleman, of excellent position, and with all the prejudices of your class, know about us who are outcasts? If you want to understand us you must be an outcast yourself; *we* are not playing at the game.’

This conversation took place upon the lawn, at the conclusion of one of Toddles’ lessons in French, and Shelton left John Noble maintaining to the young foreigner, with his reasonable stubbornness, that Anarchists and himself had much in common. He was returning to the house, when someone called his name from beneath the holm-oak. There, sitting Turkish fashion on the grass, with a pipe between his teeth, he found a man who had arrived the night before, and impressed him by a taciturnity which, oddly enough, had left an impression of friendly frankness. His name was Whyddon, and someone had said that he was just back from service in Central Africa. He had a brown face and a large jaw, small but good and steady eyes, and a strong, spare figure.

‘Oh, Mr. Shelton!’ he said, ‘I wondered if you could tell me what sort of tips I ought to give the servants here; after ten years away I’m so out of it.’

Shelton smiled, and sat down beside him, unconsciously also assuming a cross-legged attitude, which he did not find comfortable.

‘I was listening,’ said his new acquaintance, ‘to the little chap having his French lesson. I’ve forgotten

all mine. One feels a hopeless duffer knowing no languages.'

'But I suppose you speak Arabic?' said Shelton.

'Oh, Arabic and a dialect or two; they don't count.' There was a most attractive simplicity in his voice. Lighting his pipe, he went on: 'That tutor has a strange face.'

'Do you think so?' said Shelton, interested. 'He's had a strange life.'

Whyddon spread his hands, palms downwards, on the grass, puffed smoke, and looked at Shelton with a smile in his eyes.

'I should put him down as a rolling stone,' he said. 'It's an odd thing, I've seen white men in Central Africa with a good deal of his look about them.'

'That's very good diagnosis,' said Shelton, surprised, 'as I happen to know.'

'I'm always sorry for those fellows,' continued Whyddon; 'there's generally some good in them. They are their own enemies. A bad business to be unable to take pride in anything one does!' and there was a look of pity on his face.

'That's exactly it,' said Shelton. 'I've often tried to put it into words. Is it incurable?'

'I think so,' returned Whyddon.

'Do you understand why?'

Whyddon pondered.

'I rather think,' he said at last, 'it must be because they have too much critical faculty. You can't teach a man, I think, to be proud of his work; that lies in his blood;' and, taking his pipe from his mouth, he folded his arms across his breast and heaved a sigh. He looked statuesque sitting there under the dark foliage, with his

eyes on the bright sunshine outside—like a type of all those Englishmen who wear out their bodies in the dark places of hard work, keeping their souls burnished with a splendid optimism. ‘ You can’t think,’ he said, straightening his neck and showing his teeth in a smile, ‘ how delightful it is to be at home! You learn to love the old country by being away from it.’

Shelton suddenly conceived for him a feeling of warm liking and admiration, and after his departure, which occurred on the following day, he often thought of his brown face with the look of settled daring which was bitten deep into it, and its sympathetic taciturnity. He often thought, too, of his diagnosis of Ferrand, for he was always stumbling on instances of that power of subtle criticism which was the young foreigner’s prime claim to be considered ‘ a most awfully interesting ’ and perhaps rather shocking person.

There was an old schoolfellow of Shelton’s staying in the house whose wife was with him, and together they provided a picture of complete and harmonious domestic vacuity. Passionless, smiling, good, it was impossible to imagine a difference arising between them. Shelton, whose bedroom was next to theirs, could just hear them in the mornings talking in exactly the tones they used at lunch, and laughing with exactly the same laughs. Their life seemed to accord them perfect satisfaction ; they were supplied with their convictions by Society just as, when at home, they were supplied with all the other necessities of life by the Army and Navy Stores. Their fairly good-looking faces, with the fairly kind expressions, quickly and carefully regulated by a due and paramount sense of compromise, became so distasteful to him that when compelled to be in the same

room he would even read to get away from the necessity of looking at them. And yet they were kind—that is, fairly kind, with an unoriginal kindness—and clean and quiet in the house, except when they laughed, which was often, and at things which made him want to howl, as a dog howls at music.

‘Mr. Shelton,’ said Ferrand one day, meeting him in the road to the village, ‘I’m not an amateur of marriage—never had the chance, as you may suppose; but in any case, you have some people in the house who would make me mark time before I committed it. They seem the ideal young married people—don’t quarrel, have perfect health, agree with everybody, go to church, and have children—but I should very much like to be told what is beautiful in their life. On the contrary’—and he contorted his mouth in a grimace—‘it seems to me so ugly that I can only gasp. I would much rather they ill-treated each other, just to show they had the corner of a soul. If that is marriage, *Dieu m’en garde!*’

But Shelton did not reply; he was thinking too deeply.

The saying of John Noble’s, ‘He’s really a most awfully interesting person,’ daily grew to be more on his nerves, for it seemed to sum up an indescribable something in the attitude of all the Dennant family towards the stranger within their gates. They treated him with a sort of superior wonder on the ‘don’t touch’ system, like an object in an exhibition. The restoration, however, of his self-respect proceeded with success. It is true that the semblance of having outgrown Shelton’s clothes, his detached air, his vividly burnt face, and the quick but carefully checked play of cynicism upon his lips, introduced a suggestion of danger into the family

circle ; but, on the whole, he did much credit to his patrons. He had subdued his terror of using a razor, and looked particularly well in a suit of Shelton's flannels. After all, he had only been eight years exiled from the *frac* and other implements of, at all events middle-class, gentility, and part of that time he had been a waiter. None the less, Shelton wished him at the devil. Not because of his manners—for he was never tired of watching the subtlety with which the young foreigner adapted himself to the point of view of his hosts, while preserving always the flavour of non-acceptance which distilled from his every movement—but because that very non-acceptance, that very subtlety, were constant spurs to his own vision, inducing him to dissect the life into which he had been born and was about to marry. The process was uncomfortable. He asked himself when it had commenced, and he had to go back to the first moment of his meeting with Ferrand on the journey from Dover to London.

There was certainly kindness in a hospitality which opened its doors to so strange a bird, but once he had admitted the kindness, Shelton fell to analyzing it. Surely to himself, to people of his class, the use of kindness was a luxury, significant of no sacrifice, and productive of a pleasant feeling in the heart, such as massage will set up in the calves of the legs. 'Besides,' he thought, 'everybody is kind. The question is: What understanding is there, what real sympathy ?' The attempt to solve this problem gave him much food for thought.

The improvement which Mrs. Dennant not unfrequently commented on, the triumphant conquest of

his position by Ferrand, merely seemed to Shelton signs that he was making the most of his sudden fall into green pastures; under similar circumstances, Shelton reflected, he himself would have done the same. All this in the young foreigner he felt to be a convenient bow to property, and he had more respect for the sarcastic smile which he suspected Ferrand to be wearing at heart.

It was not long before a gradual yet sure change came over the spirit of the situation, and more and more Shelton grew conscious of a quaint uneasiness in the very breathing of the household.

‘Curious fellow you’ve got hold of there, Shelton,’ said Mr. Dennant to him one day during a game of croquet; ‘he’ll never do any good for himself, I’m afraid.’

‘In one sense I’m afraid not,’ admitted Shelton.

‘Do you know his story? I will bet you sixpence’—and Mr. Dennant paused to swing his mallet with proper accuracy—‘that he’s been in prison.’

‘Prison!’ ejaculated Shelton.

‘I think,’ said Mr. Dennant, with bent knees carefully measuring for his next shot, ‘that you ought to make inquiries—ah! missed it! Awkward these hoops!’ he cocked a judicial eye at the hoop—‘one must draw the line somewhere.’

‘I never could draw,’ returned Shelton, nettled and uneasy; ‘but I quite understand—I’ll give him a hint to go.’

‘Don’t,’ said Mr. Dennant, moving after his second ball, which Shelton had despatched to the farther end of the ground, ‘be offended, my dear Shelton, and by no means give him a hint; he interests me very much—a very nice quiet young fellow.’

That this was not his private opinion Shelton inferred from a study of Mr. Dennant's manner whenever he found himself in the presence of his vagabond guest. Underlying the well-bred banter of the tranquil voice, the quiescent and quizzical mask of the pale brown face, could be detected a throb of uneasiness, a suspicion that he, Algernon Cuffe Dennant, J.P., accustomed to laugh at other people, was being laughed at. What more natural than that he should grope for the reason of such a phenomenon! A nondescript foreigner was affecting the nerves of an English Justice of the Peace —no small tribute to the biting and intrusive flavour of Ferrand's personality. The latter would sit silent throughout a lunch, and yet make what the novelists call ‘an effect.’ He, the object of their kindness, curiosity, education, and patronage, inspired — fear. There was no longer any doubt; it was not of Ferrand they were afraid, but of the ‘unintelligible’ in him; of some horrid subtlety passing through the brain under that long, straight, wet-looking hair; of something bizarre and unconventional suddenly popping out from the curving lips below that thin, lopsided nose.

But to Shelton in this, as in everything else, Antonia was the crux of the matter. At first anxious to show her faith in her lover, she seemed unable to do enough for the young foreigner, as though she had set her heart on his salvation; but in watching her eyes when they rested on Ferrand, Shelton was perpetually reminded of her remark on the first day of his visit to Holm Oaks: ‘I suppose he’s really *good*—I mean all those things you told me about were only. . . .’

Curiosity never left her glance, nor that story of his four days’ starvation her mind; a sentimental

picturesqueness clung about that incident many times more valuable than the mere human being with whom she had so strangely come into contact. There was tragedy in the way she watched Ferrand and in the way Shelton watched her. If he had been told that he was watching her, he would have denied it in good faith ; but, as a matter of fact, it was too grimly interesting to him to find out with what eyes she viewed this visitor who embodied all the rebellious under-side of life, all that was absent in herself, and he was bound to watch her.

‘Dick,’ she said to him one day, ‘you never talk to me about Monsieur Ferrand.’

‘Do you want to talk about him?’ replied Shelton.

‘Don’t you think he’s improved?’

‘He’s fatter.’

Antonia looked grave.

‘No, but really improved?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Shelton ; ‘I can’t judge him.’

Antonia plucked at the edge of her blouse ; her face was averted, but something in her attitude alarmed him.

‘He was once a sort of gentleman,’ she said suddenly ; ‘why shouldn’t he become one again?’

Sitting on the low wall of the fruit garden, her head was framed, as in an old Italian picture, by a halo of golden plums. The light, low in the west, lay barred behind the dense foliage of the holm-oak, but a little patch filtering through a gap had rested in the heart of the plum-tree like a crown to the girl’s long-limbed figure, and the hues of her raiment, with the dark of the leaves, the red of the wall, the gold of the plums, and the passionate passing glow, were woven into a deep block of pagan colour, whence her face was dis-

engaged, meeting the eye, chaste and serene with its steadfast profile, in the deep, sweet scentlessness of the summer evening. A bird amongst the currant-bushes kept a sensuous chant vibrating through the tree, till all its shape and colour seemed alive.

‘Perhaps he doesn’t want to become a gentleman,’ said Shelton.

Antonia swung her foot impatiently.

‘How can he help wanting to?’ she exclaimed.

‘He may have a different philosophy of life.’

Antonia was slow to answer this.

‘I don’t know anything about philosophies of life,’ she said at last.

‘Well,’ he answered coldly, ‘everyone has a different philosophy of life.’

With the falling sun-glow the charm had passed off the tree. Chilled and harder, yet less deep, it was no longer a block of woven colour, old and soft and impassive, like the careless warmth of a goddess ; it was now only a northern tree, with a gray light through the green of its leaves—the gray, cool light of Antonia’s eyes.

‘I don’t in the least understand,’ she said ; ‘everyone wants to be good.’

‘And safe?’ queried Shelton gently.

Antonia stared.

‘Suppose,’ he said—‘I don’t pretend to know him ; I only say suppose—what Ferrand really cares for is doing things differently from other people ? If you were to load him with a character and give him plenty of money on condition that he acted as we all act, do you think he would observe your condition ?’

‘Why not?’

‘Ah ! why isn’t a cat a dog, or a pagan a Christian ?’

Antonia slid from the wall.

'You don't seem to think there's any use in trying,' she said, turning away.

Shelton made a movement as if he would go after her, and then stood still, watching her figure slowly pass beside the wall, her head outlined in the sober light above it, and her hands turned back on her narrow hips. She halted a moment at the bend and looked behind her; then, with an impatient gesture, disappeared. Antonia was slipping away from him.

A glimpse from a point outside himself would have shown him that it was he who was moving, and she standing still, like the figure of one standing by a stream watching its inevitable passage with clear, direct, and sullen eyes.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE RIVER

ONE day towards the end of August Shelton took Antonia alone upon the river—the river that, like soft music, balances and soothes the land, where the reeds and poplars, the silver swan-sails, sun and moon, woods, and the white slumbrous clouds, have conspired a poem ; where cuckoos, the wind, pigeons, and the weirs are always singing or tuning for a song, and in the flash of a naked body, the play of water-lily leaves, queer goblin stumps, and the twilight face of Pan through twisted tree-roots, shines the whole free world that never existed, yet always will exist.

The reach down which Shelton paddled was innocent of launches, champagne bottles, and loud laughter ; it was an uncivilized reach, and seldom troubled by such humanizing influences. He paddled slowly, silent and absorbed, watching Antonia. An unaccustomed languor clung about her ; her eyes had shadows, as though she had not slept ; the colour glowed soft in her cheeks, and the stuff of her white frock seemed alight with golden radiance. She made Shelton pull into the reeds, and plucked two of the rounded lilies sailing like ships against the slow-moving water. On her lap in their white and golden insularity they seemed emblems of the spirit that hovered round her.

'Pull into the shade, Dick,' she said; 'it's too hot out here.'

The brim of her linen hat kept the sun from her face, but her head was drooping like the head of a flower at noon.

Shelton saw that the heat really affected her, as too hot a day will dim the clear iciness of a northern plant. His sculls started ripples that leaped from the stroke, and swam in grave diminuendo till they touched the banks.

He shot the boat into a bushy cleft, and, shipping his sculls, caught the branch of an overhanging tree. The skiff, with a mutinous vibration, rested motionless, save for the stir of balancing movement which gives to a boat its likeness to a living thing.

'I should hate to live in London,' said Antonia suddenly; 'the slums must be so awful. What a pity, when there are places like this! But it's no good thinking.'

'No,' answered Shelton slowly; 'I suppose it is no good.'

'There are some bad cottages at the lower end of Cross Eaton. I went there one day with Miss Truecote. The people won't help themselves. It's so discouraging to help people who won't help themselves.'

She was leaning her elbows on her knees, and, with her chin resting on her hands, gazed up at Shelton. All around them hung a tent of green, thick and soft, and below swam a mirror of water, dyed to its very depth with green refraction. Willow boughs swaying out over the boat caressed Antonia's arms and shoulders; her face and hair alone were free, and, like those of an

island spirit, ruled their environment, content, and chaste, and unsubdued.

'So discouraging,' she repeated.

'It's all a mystery,' said Shelton.

Antonia neither spoke nor moved ; a silence, close as the thicket of the leaves, enveloped them ; she seemed thinking deeply.

'Doubts don't help you,' she said suddenly ; 'how can you get any good out of them ? The only thing is to win victories.'

'Victories?' said Shelton. 'I'd rather understand things and let them slide.'

He had risen to his feet, his brown fist grasping a stunted branch, and canting the boat's nose deeper into the bank.

'How can you say that, Dick ? Let things slide ! It's like Monsieur Ferrand.'

'Have you such a bad opinion of him ?' asked Shelton. He felt on the verge of some discovery.

Antonia thrust her chin deeper into her hands ; there was the impatience in the movement that comes before an attempt to free the mind.

'I liked him at first,' she said ; 'I thought he was different. I thought he couldn't really be——'

'Really be what ?' asked Shelton eagerly.

But Antonia did not answer.

'I don't know,' she said at last. 'I can't explain what I mean. I thought——'

Shelton still stood holding the branch, and the oscillation of the boat freed a constant infinity of tiny ripples that glided over the green mirage under the branches towards the flowing water outside. In spite of an instinct to keep silence, he asked :

‘ You thought—what ?’

He ought to have seen something pathetic in her face as she looked up at him ; it had grown younger, more childish, even timid. She said in a voice smooth and round and young, as if touchingly she were liberating her soul :

‘ You know, Dick, I do think we ought to try. I know I don’t try half hard enough. It doesn’t do any good thinking ; when you think, everything seems so mixed, as if there were nothing to lay hold of. I do so hate to feel like that. It isn’t as if we didn’t know what was right. Sometimes I think, and think, and it’s all no good, only a waste of time, and you feel at the end as if you had been doing wrong.’

Shelton frowned.

‘ What hasn’t been through fire is no good,’ he said dully, and, letting go the branch, he sat down. The boat, freed from restraint, edged out towards the current. ‘ But what about Ferrand ?’

‘ I lay awake last night wondering what it is makes you like him ? He is so bitter ; he makes me feel unhappy. He never seems contented with anything. And he despises’—her face hardened—‘ I mean, he hates us all.’

‘ So should I if I were he,’ said Shelton.

The boat drifted along the bank, and gleams of sunlight chased over their faces. Antonia went on :

‘ He seems to be always looking at dark things, or else he looks as if—as if he could—enjoy himself too much. I thought—I thought at first,’ she stammered, ‘ that we could do him good.’

‘ Do him good ! Ha, ha !’

His laughter startled a rat that shot into the water,

and went swimming for its life against the stream ; and he suddenly saw that he had done what he should not have done—had done an unpardonable thing : let her with a jerk into a secret hitherto unacknowledged even by himself—the secret that her eyes were not his, her way of looking at things not his way of looking at them, nor ever would be. He quickly muffled his laughter. After one look Antonia had dropped her eyes ; her figure had regained its indifferent languor, but the bosom of her dress heaved, as though she were moved. Shelton watched her, racking his brains to explain away that fatal laugh, but he could not. It was one of those clear brutalities that come from the heart, a little piece of truth, and, as such, indelible. He paddled slowly on, close to the bank, in one of the long silences of the river.

The breeze had died away, not a fish was rising, and but for the lost music of the larks no birds were piping ; alone, a single pigeon at brief intervals cooed complacently from a neighbouring wood.

They did not stay much longer in the boat.

On the homeward journey in the pony-cart, rounding a corner of the road, they came upon Ferrand in his pince-nez, holding a cigarette between his fingers and talking to a tramp, who was squatting on the bank and also smoking a cigarette. The young foreigner recognised them, and at once removed his hat.

‘There he is,’ muttered Shelton, acknowledging the salute.

Antonia bowed.

‘Oh !’ she cried, when they were out of hearing, ‘I wish he’d go. I can’t bear to see him ; it’s like looking at the dark.’

CHAPTER XXIX

ON THE WING

THAT night, after he had gone up to his room, Shelton filled his pipe for the unpleasant duty before him. He had made up his mind to tell Ferrand to put an end to his visit. He was still debating whether he should write or go down to the young foreigner's room, when there came a knock at the door, and the latter himself appeared.

'I should be sorry,' said Ferrand, breaking an awkward silence, 'if you were to think me ungrateful, but I don't see any future for me here. It would be better for me to go. I should never be content to pass my life teaching languages—*ce n'est guère dans mon caractère.*'

As soon as what he had been cudgelling his brains to find a way of saying had thus been said for him, Shelton experienced a sense of disapproval.

'What do you expect to get that's better?' said he brutally, and avoiding the young foreigner's eyes.

'Thanks to your kindness,' replied the latter, 'I find myself restored, and feel that I ought to make some good efforts to dominate my social position.'

'I should think it well over, if I were you,' said Shelton.

'I have, and it seems to me that I'm wasting my time. For a man with any courage languages are not

a career; and, though I've many defects, I still have courage.'

Shelton put his pipe down in silence. The belief of Ferrand in his career was pathetic; it was not an assumed belief, but neither was it, he felt, the true motive of his departure. 'He's tired,' he thought; 'that's it. He wants to be off.' And having the instinctive conviction that nothing would keep Ferrand, he redoubled his cautions.

'I should have thought,' said he, 'that you would have done better to have held on and saved a little before going off to goodness knows where.'

'I've never been able to save,' replied Ferrand—'that's impossible for me—but, thanks to you and your good friends, I've enough to make front to the first necessities. I'm in correspondence with a friend; it's of great importance for me to reach Paris before all the world returns. I've a chance to get a post in one of the West African companies. One makes fortunes out there—if one survives, and, as you know, I don't set much store by my life.'

'We have a proverb,' said Shelton: '"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush!"'

'Like all proverbs,' returned Ferrand, 'that's a half-truth. All these things are an affair of temperament. It's not in my character to dandle one when I see two waiting to be caught; *voyager, apprendre, c'est plus fort que moi.*' He paused, then, with a nervous goggle of the eyes and an ironical smile, continued: 'Besides, my dear Monsieur Shelton, it will be better for me to go. I have never been one to rock myself with illusions, and I see pretty clearly that my presence is hardly acceptable in this house.'

'What makes you say that?' asked Shelton, feeling that the murder was out.

'My dear sir, all the world has not your understanding and absence of prejudice, and though your friends have been so extremely kind to me, I am in a false position; I cause them embarrassment, which is not extraordinary when you reflect what I have been, and that they know my history.'

'Not through me,' said Shelton quickly, 'for I don't know it myself.'

'It's enough,' said the young foreigner, 'that they feel I'm not a bird of their feather. They cannot change, and I cannot change either; I have never wanted to remain where I'm not welcome.'

Shelton turned to the window, and, leaning his chin on his hands, stared out into the darkness; he would never quite fathom this singular compound of delicacy and cynicism, and he wondered whether or no Ferrand had smothered the words: 'Why, even you won't be sorry to see my back!'

'Well,' he said at last, 'if you must go, you must. When do you start?'

'I've arranged with a man to carry my things to the early train in the morning. I think it better not to say good-bye. I've written a letter instead; here it is. I left it open for you to read if you wish.'

'Then,' said Shelton, with a curious rush of relief, and regret, and goodwill, 'I shan't see you again?'

Ferrand passed his hand stealthily down his trousers and held it out.

'I shall never forget what you have done for me,' he said.

'Mind you write,' said Shelton.

'Yes, yes'—the young foreigner's face was oddly contorted—'you don't know what a difference it makes to have a correspondent ; it gives one courage. I hope to remain a long time in correspondence with you.'

'I dare say you do,' thought Shelton grimly, but with a certain queer emotion.

'You will do me the justice to remember that I have never asked you for anything,' said Ferrand. 'Thank you a thousand times. Good-bye !'

He again wrung Shelton's hand in his damp grasp, and, going out, left Shelton with a lump in his throat. 'You will do me the justice to remember that I have never asked you for anything.' The phrase exercised a stupefying effect on him, and his mind flew back over all his relations with the young foreigner. It was a fact : from beginning to end he had never actually asked Shelton for anything. Amazing ! He turned away from the door, and, sitting on his bed, began to read the letter Ferrand had left in his hand. It was written, as usual, in French.

'DEAR MADAME (it ran),

'It will be insupportable to me, after your kindness, if you take me for ungrateful. Unfortunately, a crisis has arisen which plunges me into the necessity of leaving your hospitality. In all lives, as you are doubtless aware, there arise circumstances that one cannot control, and I know you will pardon me that I enter into no explanation on an event which gives me great chagrin, and, above all, renders me subject to an imputation of ingratitude, which, believe me, dear Madame, by no means lies in my character. I know well enough that it is a breach of politeness to leave

you without in person conveying the expression of my profound reconnaissance, but if you consider how hard it is for me to be compelled to abandon all that is so distinguished in the domestic life, you will forgive my weakness. People like me, who have gone through existence with their eyes open, have been obliged to remark that those who are endowed with riches have a right to look down on such as are not by wealth and breeding fitted to occupy the same position. I shall never dispute a right so natural and salutary, seeing that without this distinction, this superiority, which makes of the well-born and the well-bred a race apart, the rest of the world would have no standard by which to rule their lives, no anchor to throw into the depths of that vast sea of fortune and misfortune in which we others drive before the wind. It is because of this, dear Madame, that I regard myself so doubly fortunate to have been able for a few minutes in this bitter pilgrimage called life to sit beneath the tree of security. To have been able, if only for an hour, to sit and see the pilgrims pass, all the pilgrims with blistered feet and ragged garments, and who yet, dear Madame, guard in their hearts a certain joy in life, an illegitimate joy, unknown in houses, like the desert air which travellers tell you fills men as with wine—to be able thus to sit for an hour, and with a complacent smile to watch them pass, lame and blind, in all the rags of their deserved misfortunes, can you not conceive, dear Madame, how that must be for such as me a great pleasure? Whatever one may say, it is always sweet, from a position of security, to watch the sufferings of others; it gives one a good sensation in the heart.

‘In writing this, I remember that I myself once had

the chance of passing all my life in this enviable security, and as you may imagine, dear Madame, I curse myself that I should ever have had the courage to step beyond the boundaries of this fine tranquil existence. Certainly there have been times during my life when I have asked myself: "Is there really any difference between the wealthy and us others, birds of the fields, who have perhaps our own opinions, grown from the pains of being a little in want of bread, who see that the human heart is not always an affair of figures, or of these good maxims that one finds in copy-books—is there really any difference?" It is with shame that I confess to have put to myself a question so heretical. But now, when for these three or four weeks I have had the delight of resting under your roof, I see how wrong I was to entertain such doubts. It is a great happiness to me to have decided this point, for it is not in my character to pass through life uncertain—mistaken, perhaps—on psychological matters such as these. No, Madame; you may rest happily assured that there *is a great difference*, which in the future will be sacred for me. For, believe me, Madame, it would be a calamity for high Society if by chance there should arise amongst them any unfortunate understanding of all that side of life which, vast as the plains, bitter as the sea, now black as the ashes of a corpse, and sometimes more free than the wings of a bird that flies away, is so justly beyond the conception of their philosophy. Yes, believe me, dear Madame, there is no danger in the world so much to be dreaded as this by all the members of that circle, most illustrious and respectable, which is called high Society.

'From what I have said you may imagine how hard

it is for me to take my flight. I shall always keep for you the most distinguished sentiments. With the expression of my full regard for yourself and your good family, and of a gratitude as sincere as it is badly expressed,

‘ Believe me, dear Madame,
‘ Your very devoted
‘ LOUIS FERRAND.’

On finishing, Shelton's first impulse was to tear the letter up; but he reflected that he had no right to do this, and that Mrs. Dennant's French was orthodox. He felt sure she would never understand the young foreigner's subterranean innuendoes. He closed the envelope and got into bed, still haunted by Ferrand's parting look.

It was with no small feeling of embarrassment, however, that, having despatched the letter to its destination by an early footman, he made his appearance at the breakfast-table on the following morning. From behind an expensive Viennese coffee-urn, filled with French coffee, Mrs. Dennant, who had just placed four eggs in a German egg-boiler, looked round at him with a kindly smile.

‘ Dick, an egg?’ she said, holding up a fifth.

‘ No, thank you,’ replied Shelton, hastily greeting the table and dropping into a seat.

He was a little late, and the babble of conversation rose hilariously around him.

‘ My dear,’ continued Mr. Dennant, who was talking to his youngest daughter, ‘ you'll have no chance whatever against us—not the least little bit of chance.’

'Father, what nonsense! You know we shall beat your heads off!'

'Before it's too late, then, I will eat a muffin. Shelton, pass the muffins, that's a good fellow!' But in making this request Mr. Dennant avoided his guest's eye.

Shelton glanced at Antonia; she, too, seemed to avoid looking at him. She was talking to an Authority on Art about supernatural appearances, and seemed in the highest spirits. He rose, and, going to the side-board, helped himself to cold grouse.

'Who was the young man I saw yesterday on the lawn?' he heard the Authority on Art ask as he came back to his place. 'He struck me as having an—er—quite intelligent face.'

His own quite intelligent face, raised at a slight slant so as to look with greater accuracy through his gold nose-nippers, was the very pattern of ironical approval. 'It's a curious thing how often one meets with intelligence,' it seemed to say.

Mrs. Dennant paused in the act of adding cream to his cup, and Shelton fixed his eyes on her face; its hare-like superiority was unchanged. Thank goodness she had smelt no rat in the letter! He felt strangely disappointed.

'Oh, do you mean Monsieur Ferrand,' she said, 'teachin' Toddles French? Dobson, Professor Brayne's cup.'

'I hope I shall see him again,' cooed the Authority; 'he was quite interesting on the subject of young German working men. It seems they tramp from place to place to learn their trades. What nationality was he, if I may ask?'

Mr. Dennant, at whom this question was aimed, lifted his quizzical brows, and said :

‘Ask Shelton.’

‘Half Dutch, half French,’ muttered the latter.

‘Very interesting combination ; I hope I shall see him again.’

‘Well, you won’t,’ said Thea suddenly from her seat next her father ; ‘he’s gone.’

Shelton saw that good breeding—good breeding which was partly good breeding and partly superiority to the consciousness of having feelings at all—alone prevented them all from saying : ‘Thank goodness !’

‘Gone ? Dear me ! it’s very——’

‘Yes,’ murmured Mr. Dennant, ‘it’s very sudden.’

‘Now, Algie,’ said Mrs. Dennant, ‘it’s quite a charmin’ letter he wrote me.’

‘Oh, mother !’ cried Antonia.

And Shelton felt his face go crimson. He had suddenly remembered that her French was better than her mother’s.

‘He seems to have had some singular experiences,’ said the Authority on Art.

‘Yes,’ echoed Mr. Dennant ; ‘he’s had some singular experiences. If you want to know all the details, Professor, ask our friend Shelton ; it’s quite a romance. In the meantime, my dear, may I have another cup ?’

The Authority on Art, who was not devoid of a certain absent-minded malice, spurred his curiosity to a further effort, and, turning his well-defended eyes on Shelton, murmured :

‘Well, Mr. Shelton, you are the historian, it seems.’

‘There is no history,’ said Shelton, without looking up.

'Ah, that's very dull,' cooed the Authority on Art.

'My dear Dick,' said Mrs. Dennant, 'that was really a most touchin' story about his goin' without food in Paris.'

Shelton shot another look at Antonia; her face was full of malicious curiosity. Something within him flamed up. 'I hate your d——d superiority!' thought he, staring the Authority on Art in the face.

'There's nothing,' said that gentleman, 'more interesting than starvation. Come, Mr. Shelton.'

'I can't tell stories,' said Shelton; 'never could.'

At that moment he cared not a straw for Ferrand, his coming, his going, or his history. His heart felt like lead.

CHAPTER XXX

THE LADY FROM BEYOND

THE morning was sultry, a brooding, steamy morning. Antonia had gone to her music, and from the room where Shelton endeavoured to fix his attention on a book he could hear her practising scales with a cold fury that had the power of casting additional dejection on his spirit. He did not see her till lunch, and then she again sat next to the Authority on Art. Her cheeks were pale, there was something feverish in the way she chattered to her neighbour, but she still refused to look at Shelton. He felt very miserable. After lunch, when most of the party had left the table, an uncanny prelude occurred to an incident which befell later.

There had been a discussion upon the advantages of having neighbours in the country.

‘Of course,’ said Mrs. Dennant, ‘there are the Foliots; but then nobody calls on them.’

‘Ah!’ murmured the Authority, ‘the Foliots—the Foliots—the people—er—who—quite so !’

‘It’s really distressin’, she looks so sweet ridin’ about. Many people with worse stories get called upon,’ continued Mrs. Dennant, with that large frankness of intrusion upon doubtful subjects which may always be made by the best people in a certain way :

'But, after all, one couldn't ask them to meet anybody.'

'Exactly,' assented the Authority. 'I used to know Foliot. A thousand pities. They say she was a very pretty woman.'

'Oh, not pretty!' said Mrs. Dennant—'more interest-in' lookin', I should say.'

Shelton, who remembered the lady in question, noticed that they spoke of her in the past tense. He did not look at Antonia; for though troubled at her presence while such a subject was being discussed, he hated his conviction that her face was as unruffled as though the Foliotics had been a separate species. There was, in fact, a faint curiosity about her eyes, a faint impatience about her lips; she was rolling little crumbs of bread, and suddenly yawning, she muttered something, and rose. Shelton intercepted her at the door.

'Where are you going?' he asked.

'For a walk.'

'Mayn't I come?'

She shook her head.

'I'm going to take Toddles.'

Shelton held the door open for her, and returned to his seat at the table.

'Yes,' said the Authority, sipping his sherry, 'I'm afraid it's all up with young Foliot.'

'*Such* a pity!' murmured Mrs. Dennant, and her kindly face looked disturbed. 'I've known him ever since he was a boy. Of course, I think he made a great mistake to bring her down here. Not even bein' able to get married makes it so doubly awkward. Oh, I think he made a great mistake.'

'Ah!' said the Authority, 'but d'you suppose that

makes much difference ? Even if What's-his-name gave her a divorce, I don't think, you know, that——'

'Oh, it *does* make a difference ! So many people would be inclined to look over it in time. But as it is it's quite hopeless. It's so very awkward for people, too, meetin' them about. The Telfords and the Butterwicks—by the way, they're comin' to dinner to-night—live quite near them, you know.'

'Did you ever meet her before—er—before—the flood ?' asked the Authority ; his lips parting and unexpectedly revealing his teeth gave him a shadowy—ever so shadowy—resemblance to a goat.

'Yes ; I did meet her once at the Branksomes'. I thought her quite a charmin' person.'

'Poor fellow !' said the Authority vaguely ; 'they tell me he was going to have taken the hounds.'

'And there are those delightful coverts of his. Algie often used to shoot there, and now they say he just has his brother to shoot with him. Oh, it's really too melancholy ! Did you know him, Dick ?'

'Foliot ?' replied Shelton absently. 'No; I never met him. I've seen her, of course, once or twice at Ascot.'

Through the window he had caught sight of Antonia in her scarlet tam-o'-shanter, swinging her stick, and he got up with an appearance of unconcern, and went to the window. Just then Toddles came running out of the house, and bounded up against his sister. They went off arm in arm. Shelton saw that she knew he was at the window, yet she gave him no friendly glance ; he felt more than ever miserable. He threw open the French window and stepped out upon the drive ; there was something lurid and gloomy in the upper air ; the lms had a heavy blackness of outline, still and distinct ;

the wonted rustle of the aspen-tree was gone, and even the rooks were silent. A store of undischarged electricity lay heavy on the heart of Nature. He paced slowly up and down, his pride forbidding him to go to the gate and look after her, and presently sat down on a stone seat under the house fronting the road. He remained there a long while staring up at the elms, asking himself what he had done and what he ought to do. And somehow he was afraid. A sense of loneliness was upon him, so real and painful that he shivered in the sweltering heat. He was there, perhaps, an hour, quite alone, and without seeing a soul pass along the road, when there came the sound of a horse's hoofs, and at the same moment he heard a motor-car approaching from the opposite direction. The equestrian made her appearance first, riding a gray horse with the high-set tail of an Arab. She was holding him with difficulty, for the whirr of the approaching car grew momentarily louder. Shelton rose from the bench ; the car flashed by. He saw the horse stagger and rear in the gateway, crushing, as it seemed, its rider against the gate-post.

He started to run, but before he reached the gate the lady was on foot, holding the plunging horse by the bridle.

'I hope you aren't hurt !' cried Shelton breathlessly, and he, too, made a grab at the bridle : 'Those beastly cars !'

'I don't know,' she said. 'Please don't ; he won't let a stranger touch him.'

Shelton let go, and, standing back, watched her coax the horse to a standstill. She was rather tall, dressed in a gray habit, with a gray Russian-shaped cap upon

her head, and he suddenly recognised in her the Mrs. Foliot of whom they had been speaking at lunch.

'He'll be quiet now,' she said, 'if you wouldn't mind holding him a minute.'

She gave him the reins, and leaned against the gate. She was very pale.

'I do hope he hasn't hurt you,' said Shelton. He was not more than a couple of yards from her, and well able to see her face—a curious face, with high cheekbones and a flattish moulding, listless, enigmatic, but with something unexpectedly passionate in its paleness. Her lips, compressed till they were lines of pallor, smiled; pallid, too, were her gray, deep-set eyes with greenish tints; and, above all, pale was the ashy mass of hair coiled under her gray cap. 'I do hope you're not hurt,' he repeated.

'Th—thanks!' she said; 'I shall be all right in a minute. Will you lead him into the road? I'm sorry to have made such a fuss.'

She continued to bite her lips and smile that travesty of a smile.

'I'm sure you're hurt; do let me go for—' stammered Shelton. 'I mean, I can easily get help.'

'Help!' she said, with a little hard laugh; 'oh no, thanks!'

She turned away from the gate, and crossed the road to where he was holding the horse. Shelton was puzzled; to conceal his embarrassment he looked at the horse's legs, and noticed that the gray was resting one of them. He ran his hand down.

'I'm afraid,' he said, 'your horse has knocked his off knee; it's swelling already.'

She smiled again.

'Then we're both cripples,' she said.

'He'll be lame when he gets cold. Wouldn't you like to put him up in the stables here? I'm sure you ought to drive home.'

'No, thanks; if I'm able to ride him he ought to be able to carry me. Would you give me a hand up?'

Her voice sounded harder, as though something had offended her; and rising from his inspection of the horse's leg, Shelton saw Antonia and Toddles close by. They had come through a wicket-gate leading from the fields.

The latter ran up to him at once.

'We saw it,' he whispered—'a jolly smash-up. Can't I do something?'

'Hold his bridle,' answered Shelton, and he looked from one lady to the other.

There are moments when faces and expressions fix themselves on the mind with a painful distinctness, and this was one of such moments to Shelton. Those two faces close together, under their respective headgear of scarlet and gray, presented a contrast almost cruelly vivid—a contrast such as is only seen in those phases of Nature where the human being has been at work. Antonia was flushed with the haste she had made; her eyes had grown deep blue; the flash of startled uncertainty had passed and left her face interrogative.

'Wouldn't you like to come in and wait? We could send you home in the brougham,' she said.

The lady called Mrs. Foliot stood with one arm across the crupper of the saddle, biting her lips and still smiling her enigmatic smile, and it was *her* visage that remained most vividly on Shelton's mind, in its ashy setting of hair, with its pallor, and its fixed, scornful eyes.

'Oh no, thanks!' she said; 'you're very kind.'

The tone caused a complete change in the young girl's face; the doubt, the confusion, the semi-friendliness, the anxiety in it vanished, and were replaced by a mask of hostility, and this expression seemed to embrace Shelton too. After a long, cold look at them both she turned away. Mrs. Foliot gave a little laugh, and raised her foot for Shelton's assistance. He heard a hiss of pain as he swung her into the saddle, but by the time he stood upright she was smiling again.

'Anyway,' he said impatiently, 'let me come and see that you don't break down.'

'No,' she answered; 'it's only two miles. I'm not made of sugar.'

'Then I shall simply have to follow.'

She shrugged her shoulders, and fixed a resolute look on him.

'Would that boy like to come?' she asked.

Toddles left his post at the horse's head.

'By Jove!' cried he, 'wouldn't I just!'

'Then,' she said, 'I think that'll be best. You've been awfully kind.'

She bowed, smiled once more her inscrutable smile, touched the gray with her whip, and started with Toddles trotting at her side.

Shelton was left with Antonia beneath the elms. A puff of tepid air bathed their faces, as though it had fallen from the bushy branches of the trees above, and its breath seemed more than ever a warning of the menace in the heavy purple of the heat clouds; low rumbles of thunder travelled slowly from the horizon.

'We're going to have a storm,' he hazarded.

Antonia nodded. The flush had left her; she was

nearly as pale as the lady who had ridden away, and her face still wore its look of cold offence.

'I've got a headache,' she said. 'I shall go in and lie down.'

Shelton tried to speak, but he could not; something kept him silent—a sort of perverse wonder, a submission to something that was coming to pass, like the mute submission of the fields and birds to the menace of the storm.

He watched her into the house, and went back to the stone seat. And the silence seemed to grow, the flowers even ceased to exude fragrance; they, too, were numbed by the weight of the air.

All the long house behind him seemed asleep or deserted. No noise came forth, no laughter, the sound of no music, not even the ringing of a bell; the heat had wrapped it round with an impenetrable drowsiness. And the silence began to add to the solitude and oppression within him. What an unlucky chance, that woman's accident! Designed by Providence to put Antonia further away from him than ever! Why was not the world entirely composed of immaculate persons? He rose and began to pace up and down, tortured by a dreadful heartache.

'I must get rid of this,' he thought, 'at all costs. I'll go for a good tramp, and chance getting caught in the storm.'

As he left the drive he ran into Toddles returning with a face as red as a turkey-cock.

'I saw her home,' he crowed. 'I say, she's a ripper! She'll be as lame as a tree to-morrow; so will the gee. Jolly hot, isn't it?'

This meeting showed Shelton that he had been an

hour upon the stone seat ; he had thought it had been about ten minutes, and the discovery alarmed him. It seemed to bring the seriousness of his fear—his inexplicable, miserable fear—suddenly home to him. He started with a swinging stride, keeping his eyes resolutely fixed on the road, and unconscious of the perspiration streaming down his face.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE STORM

IT was past seven when Shelton returned from his walk; the storm had not yet broken, a few heat drops had splashed heavily on the leaves, and the brooding silence recommenced. The world seemed prisoned beneath the purple firmament drawing ever more menacingly close.

By rapid walking in the heat he had sweated away his despond, and ran up to his room to dress for dinner with the eagerness of a man who is to see his mistress after a long estrangement. He took a cold bath, and, straightening his tie-ends, smiled at himself in the glass. He thought of his fear, unhappiness, and doubts as a man thinks of a bad dream, with the comfortable certainty of how much worse off he would have been had it all been true.

It was the night of a dinner-party, and when he reached the drawing-room the guests were already assembled, chattering of the expected storm. Antonia was not yet down, and Shelton stood by the piano lost in the anticipation of her entry. Red faces, spotless shirt-fronts, angular elbows, and freshly-twisted hair were all around him, but he had no consciousness of the persons to whom they belonged. Someone handed

him a buttonhole, a clove pink—one of those flowers Antonia had declared suitable to him, and as he held it absently to his nose she herself came in, breathless, as though she had dressed hurriedly and rushed down-stairs. Her cheeks, no longer languid and pale, glowed, and her hand kept stealing to her throat. The fires of the impending tempest seemed to have been lighted within her beforehand, to be scorching her body, colourless in its white frock from head to foot, and as she passed, so close that her skirt brushed his knee, her fragrance burned his senses like a love-philtre.

She had never seemed to him so lovely.

Perhaps never again will Shelton breathe the perfume of melons and pines without a sense of intoxication in his blood. From where he sat at dinner he could not see Antonia, and amidst the clatter of voices, the clink of glass and silver, the sights and sounds and scents of the feast, he kept thinking of the way he would go to her and say that nothing in the world mattered but her love. He paid little heed to the number of times the butler filled his glass, but drank all he was given. The frosted, pale-gold liquid of the champagne seemed like water, after his walk.

The windows stood wide open in the heat, and the world beyond was draped in a thick, soft blackness, where only the trees could be discerned like blots of pitch upon a blue-black curtain. Not a breath came in, not a single candle-flame, tall above the flowers, quivered, but two large moths, like creatures clinging to hope, and fearful of the heavy dark, flew in and began wheeling above the table between the lights over the heads of the guests, whose necks they fanned with their wings. One fell scorched into a dish of fruit, and

was borne away ; but the other, eluding the swish of napkins and the efforts of the footmen, continued to make its soft, fluttering rushes at the flame of a centre candle, till, at the request of his neighbour, Shelton rose and caught it in his hand. He took it to the window and threw it into the darkness, and he noticed that the air was thick and tepid to his face, like lukewarm water. At a sign from Mr. Dennant the muslin curtains were drawn across the windows, and in recognition, perhaps, of this protection, this frothy, dainty barrier between them and the muffled terrors of Nature, everyone broke out with a renewed vigour of talk. It was such a night as comes sometimes after a long spell of fine weather, frightening in its heat, and in its silence broken by the intoning of distant thunder that came travelling low along the ground like the mutinous muttering of all the dark places of life—such a night as seems, with its very breathlessness, to smother light, with its menace of fate to justify cowardice itself.

The ladies rose at last, and Shelton, who stood by the door, scarcely breathed as Antonia passed. He returned to the table. The circle of rosewood, divested of its cloth, strewn with flowers and silver gilt, bore to his fancy a resemblance to some autumn pool whose brown depths of oily water gleam under the sunset with red and yellow leaves, and above it in the heat the smoke of cigarettes clung, like a mist to the top of water when the sun goes down. A queer exaltation had come over him, and he became involved in an argument with his neighbour on the English character—of all subjects to choose in an English country house.

‘ In England we’ve mislaid the recipe of life,’ he said

slowly. ‘Pleasure, you know, is a lost art. We don’t get drunk, we’re ashamed of love, and as to beauty, we’ve lost the eye for it. In exchange we’ve got money, but what’s the good of money when we don’t know how to spend it?’ and, excited by the smile on his neighbour’s lips, he went on: ‘And as to thought, we’re so occupied in thinking of what our neighbours are thinking that we never think at all. Have you ever watched a foreigner’s eyes when he’s listening to an Englishman? We’re in the habit of despising foreigners, but, by Jove! the contempt we have for them is nothing to the contempt they have for us. It worries me that we should give them the chance. And they’re perfectly right! Look at our taste: we haven’t any. What’s the good of having possessions if we don’t know how to enjoy them?’

‘That’s rather new to me,’ said his neighbour. ‘It’s interesting; there may be something in what you say. Did you see that case in the papers the other day of old Hornblower, who left the 1820 port that fetched a guinea a bottle? When the purchaser—poor feller!—came to drink it he found eleven bottles out of twelve completely ullaged—ha! ha! Well, there’s nothing wrong with *this*;’ and he drained his glass.

‘No,’ replied Shelton, relapsing into gloom.

When they rose to join the ladies he lingered. Instead of leaving the room with the others, he parted the curtains and went out on to the gravel terrace.

Black and breathless, the night seemed to envelop him in a bath of heat. A heavy odour, sensual and sinister in its mordant fascination, filled the air, as from a sudden flowering of amorous shrubs. And he stood drinking it in with greedy nostrils; he would have

liked to fling himself on the turf and roll. Putting his hand down, he felt the grass ; it was dry, and gave an electric sensation to the palm of his hand. Close by, glowing with pale candescence, were three or four lilies, the authors of that intoxicating perfume. The blossoms seemed to be rising at him through the darkness, as though putting up faces to be kissed. He straightened himself abruptly, and returned to the house, wiping his flushed face.

The guests had nearly all gone when Shelton, who was watching her, saw Antonia slip through the drawing-room window into the garden. He could follow the white glimmer of her frock across the lawn, but lost it amongst the shadow of the trees, and, casting a hasty look round to see that he was not observed, he too slipped out. The blackness and the heat were stifling, but he took great breaths of it as if it were the purest mountain air, and, treading softly on the grass, stole on towards the holm-oak. His lips were dry, and his heart beat painfully. The mutter of distant thunder had quite ceased, and suddenly waves of hot air came wheeling against his face with a curious fanning, and in their midst a sudden rush of cold ; and all this was repeated twice or thrice. ‘The storm’s coming,’ he thought, and, bending almost double to hide the gleam of his shirt-front, stole on towards the tree. She was lying in the hammock, her figure a white blurr in the very heart of the tree’s shadow, rocking to a little monotonous creak of the branch. Shelton held his breath ; she had not heard him. He crept closer behind the trunk inch by inch, till he stood within touch of her. ‘I mustn’t startle her,’ he thought, and, clenching his hands to steady his voice, he whispered : ‘Antonia.’

There was a faint stir in the hammock, but no answer. He stood over her, but even then he could not see her face ; he only had a sense of something breathing, stirring, alive, within a yard of him—of something warm and soft. He whispered again, ‘Antonia !’ but again there came no answer, and a sort of fear and a sort of frenzy seized upon him. He could no longer hear her breathe ; the creaking of the branch had ceased. What was passing in that silent, living creature within a yard of him ? And then he heard again the sound of her breathing, but different, quick and scared, like the fluttering of a bird, and in a moment he was staring in the dark at an empty hammock.

He stayed beside the empty hammock till he could bear the uncertainty no longer. As he crossed the lawn the sky was rent from end to end by a jagged flash, a spurt of rain spattered him from head to foot, and with a deafening crack the thunder broke.

He sought the smoking-room, but recoiled at the door, and, going to his own room, threw himself on the bed. The thunder groaned and sputtered in long volleys ; livid gleams of lightning showed him the outline of every single article in the room with a weird distinctness that rent from them all likeness to the purpose for which they were intended, and seemed to bereave them of their utility, of their luxurious matter-of-factness, to present them as skeletons, as abstractions, with something indecent in their appearance, like the naked nerves and sinews of a preserved leg in a museum. The sound of the rain sluicing against the house was bewildering, stunning, even to his powers of thought, and he rose to shut his windows ; then, returning to his bed, threw himself on it again, this time with his face

down. He stayed there while the storm lasted, in a kind of stupor ; but when it was over, and the boom of retreating thunder grew every minute more distant, he dragged himself up, and, lighting his candles, began to undress. Then for the first time he saw something white lying close to the door.

It was a note :

‘ I have made a mistake. Please forgive me, and go away.—ANTONIA.’

CHAPTER XXXII

WILDERNESS

WHEN he read this note Shelton was stunned. He put it down on the dressing-table beside his gold sleeve-links, stared at his face in the glass, and laughed. At the end of the laugh his lips writhed ; he threw himself on the bed, and pressed his face into the pillows. He lay there half dressed during the rest of the night, and when, soon after dawn, he got up, had not made up his mind what he would do. The only thing certain was that he must not meet Antonia.

At last he penned the following :

‘I have had a sleepless night with toothache, and think it best to run up to the dentist at once. If a tooth must come out, the sooner the better.’

He addressed it to Mrs. Dennant, and left it on his table. After doing this he threw himself on his bed again, and this time fell into a doze.

He woke with a start, dressed, and let himself quietly out of the house. The similarity of his departure to that of Ferrand struck him. ‘Both outcasts,’ he thought.

He tramped steadily on till noon without knowing or caring where he was going ; then, entering a field, walked along the hedge, threw himself down in the far corner, and fell asleep.

He was awakened by the whirr of a covey of partridges, whose wings glistened in the sun as they strung over an adjoining field of mustard. They soon settled in the old-maidish fashion peculiar to partridges, and began calling each other together again.

Some cattle had approached in his sleep, and a beautiful bay cow, with her head turned sideways, was snuffing at him gently, exhaling an overpowering sweetness. Her legs and coat were as fine as a racehorse's, a dribble ran from the corner of her black, moist lips, and her eye was soft and cynical. Drowsily inhaling the vague sweetness of the mustard field, and rubbing the dry grass-stalks between his fingers, Shelton had a moment's happiness—the happiness of the sun and sky, of the eternal quiet, and untold movements of the fields. He wondered why human beings could not leave their troubles alone, as the cow in front of him left the flies in the corner of her eye. He dozed off again, and woke with a laugh, for this was what he had dreamed :

He fancied himself in a room, at once hall and drawing-room, of some country house. In the centre of this room was standing a lady, blended of a number of people he had known, who was looking at her face in a hand-glass. The door, or passage, admitted an old English garden with statues into his dream, and through this door people kept passing without any apparent object.

Detaching herself from amongst these people, he saw his own mother advancing towards the lady with the hand-glass, in whom he suddenly recognised Mrs. Foliot. But as he looked his mother changed into Mrs. Dennant, and began speaking in a voice that was

neither his mother's nor Mrs. Dennant's, but a crystallization of all the refined voices he had ever heard. '*Je fais de la philosophie*,' it said; 'I take the individual for what she is worth. I never condemn; and, above all, one must have spirit!' But, to Shelton's grief—for he had in some way identified himself with the success of this meeting between the lady who was not exactly Mrs. Dennant and the lady with the mirror—the latter merely continued looking at herself in the glass; and though he could not see her face, he could see in the hand-glass its reflection—pale, with greenish eyes, and a smile like the image of scorn. And then, by a swift transition, he found himself walking in the garden amongst the statues and talking to Mrs. Dennant.

It was this conversation from which he awoke with a laugh. 'My dear Dick,' she was saying, 'but I've always been accustomed to classes. It was most unkind of her not to receive me because I belong to a "class."' And her voice awakened pity in Shelton; it was like the voice of a frightened child. 'I don't know what I shall do if I have to stand on my own feet; I wasn't brought up to it. But I suppose I can try; I'm not so very old. But how am I to go to work? One must be of a certain brand, otherwise people don't think anything of you; not that I care much what people think, but you know what it is—one feels happier with a brand;' and she gave her skirts an unhappy rustle. 'But, Dick dear, whatever you do'—and the voice was full of entreaty—'let Antonia stay in a "class." Never mind about me—if I must come out of it, I must—but let her stay; any "class" so long as it is a "class." It's dreadful to have to think for yourself.'

And so he awoke, with a laugh on his lips and

actually tears in his eyes. His dream had had in it the element called Art, for, in its grotesque absurdity, Mrs. Dennant had said things which revealed the bottom of her soul more fully than anything she would have said in real life.

'No,' said a voice quite close, from behind the hedge, 'not many Frenchmen, thank God! A few coveys of Hungarians over from the Duke's. Sir James, some of this pie?'

Shelton raised himself with drowsy curiosity—he was still half asleep—and applied his face to a gap in the high, thick osiers of the hedge. Four men were seated on camp-stools round a folding-table, on which was a pie and other preparations for lunch. A game cart, decorated with birds and hares, stood at a short distance; the tails of some dogs kept waving incessantly above the long grass, and a valet was opening bottles. He had forgotten that it was the first of September, and anxiously scrutinized the four faces, having little desire to be seen. The host was a man with the trim figure of a soldier and a freckled face; an older man sat next him, square-jawed, who had an absent-looking eye and a sharp nose; nor did Shelton know the third, a bearded person whom they addressed as the Commodore; but in the fourth, to his alarm and disgust, he recognised the gentleman called Mabbey. It was really no matter of surprise to meet him miles from his own place, for he was one of those sportsmen who wander about with two guns and a valet from the twelfth of August to the end of January, and are supposed to go to Monte Carlo or to sleep for the rest of the year.

'Did you hear what a bag we made on the twelfth, Sir James?' he was saying.

‘Ah ! yes ; what was that ? Have you sold your bay horse, Glennie ?’

Shelton had not decided whether to turn his back on the hedge or to sneak away, when the Commodore’s rather thick voice began :

‘My man tellsh me that Mrs. Foliot—haw—has lamed her Arab. Does she mean to come out cubbing, Glennie ?’

Shelton could not help observing the half-envious, half-contemptuous smile that came over all their faces. ‘That lucky dog Foliot is paying for his good time now ; what a donkey to get caught out !’ it seemed to say. He turned his back on the hedge and shut his eyes, but could not help listening.

‘Cubbing ?’ replied Glennie ; ‘hardly !’

‘I never could shee anything wonderful in her looks,’ said the voice of the Commodore ; ‘so quiet, you never knew she was in the room. I remember sayin’ to her once : “Mrs. Lutheran, now what do you like besht in the world ?” and what do you think she answered ? “Music !” Haw !’

The voice of Mabbey said :

‘He was always a dark horse, Foliot. It’s always the dark horses that get let in for this kind of thing ; and there was a sound as though he had licked his lips.

‘They say,’ said the voice of the host, ‘that he never returns a greetin’ now. He’s a queer fish ; they say she’s devoted to him.’

Coming as it did upon his meeting with Mrs. Foliot, and upon the dream from which he had just awakened, this conversation exercised a sort of mesmeric effect on Shelton.

‘Well, if he gives up his huntin’ and his shootin’, I

don't see what the deuce he'll do with himself ; he's resigned his clubs, and as to his chance of Parliament——' said the voice of Mabbey.

' A thousand pities,' said the voice of Sir James ; ' still, he knew what to expect.'

' Very queer fellows, those Foliots,' said the voice of the Commodore. ' There was his father : he'd always rather talk to any shcarecrow he came across than to you or me. I wonder what he'll do with his horses ; I should like to get hold of that chestnut.'

' You can't tell *what* a fellow 'll do,' said the voice of Mabbey—' take to drink or writin' books. Old Charlie Wayne got to gazin' at stars, and twice a week he used to go and paddle round in the East End, teachin' pot-hooks——'

' Glennie,' interrupted the voice of Sir James, ' what's become of Smollett, your old keeper ?'

' Obliged to get rid of him.' Shelton again made an effort to close his ears, but again ended in listening. ' He was getting a bit too old ; lost me a lot of eggs last season.'

' Ah !' said the voice of the Commodore, ' when they oncesh begin to lose eggsh——'

' Well, as a matter of fact, his son—you remember him, Sir James—used to load for you ?—got a girl into trouble, and when her people gave her the chuck old Smollett took her in ; beastly scandal about it. The girl refused to marry young Smollett, and old Smollett backed her up. Naturally, the parson and the whole village cut up rough ; my wife offered to get her into one of those reformatory what-d'you-call-'ems, but the old fellow said she shouldn't go if she didn't want to ! Bad business altogether ; put him quite off his stroke.'

I only got five hundred pheasants last year instead of a good thousand.'

There was a silence of horror. Shelton, raising himself again, peeped through the hedge. All were eating pie.

'In W——shire,' said the voice of the Commodore, 'they always marry—haw—and live respectable ever after.'

'Quite so,' replied the voice of the host; 'it was a bit too thick. The girl said the fellow had taken advantage of her.'

'She's sorry by this time,' said the voice of Sir James; 'lucky escape for young Smollett. Queer, the obstinacy of some of these old fellows!'

'What do we do after lunch?' asked the voice of the Commodore.

'The next field,' said the voice of the host, 'is pasture. We line up along the hedge, and drive that mustard towards the roots; there ought to be a good few birds.'

Shelton rose, and, crouching, stole softly towards the gate.

'On the twelfth, shootin' in two parties,' followed the voice of Mabbey from the distance.

He felt tired, and, whether from his walk or his sleepless night, he seemed to ache in every limb; but this gave him a kind of pleasure, and he continued his tramp along the road. He was no nearer to a decision as to what he should do. It was late in the afternoon when he reached Maidenhead, and, after breaking his fast, got into a London train and went to sleep. About ten o'clock that evening he walked into St. James's Park and sat down.

The lamp-light dappled athwart the tired foliage on to those benches which have given rest to so many vagrants. Darkness has ceased to be the lawful cloak of the unhappy; but Mother Night was soft and moonless, and man had not quite despoiled her of her comfort.

Shelton was not alone upon the seat, for at the far end was sitting a young girl with a red, round, sullen face; and beyond, and beyond again, were dim benches and dim figures sitting on them, as though life and its institutions had shot them out in an endless line of rubbish.

'Ah!' thought Shelton, in the inconsequential way of very tired people, 'but the institutions are all right; it's only the spirit that's all——'

'Wrong?' said a voice behind him; 'why, of course! You've taken the wrong turning, old man.'

He turned, and saw a policeman, with a red face actually shining through the darkness, talking to a strange old figure like some aged, dishevelled bird, who had asked him a question.

'Well,' said the old man, 'thank you, constable. As I've come wrong I think I'll take a bit of a rest here;' and he came round to the seat on which Shelton was sitting, but, chewing his gums, seemed to hesitate to take the liberty of sitting down.

Shelton made room on the bench, and the old fellow took the vacant place.

'You'll excuse me, I'm sure, sir,' he said in a shaky voice, snatching at his battered hat; 'I saw you was a gentleman'—he dwelt lovingly on the word—'I wouldn't disturb you for the world. I'm not very used to being out at night, and the seats do get so full. Old

age must lean against something; you'll excuse me, I'm sure.'

'Of course,' said Shelton gently.

'I'm a respectable old man, really,' said his neighbour; 'I never in my life took a liberty. But you know, sir, at my age you get nervous; standin' about the streets as I been this last week, an' sleepin' in them doss-houses—— Oh, they're dreadful rough places—a dreadful rough lot there! Yes,' repeated the old man, as Shelton turned to scrutinize him, struck by the self-pity in his voice, 'a dreadful rough place!'

A slight movement of his head, which grew on a lean, plucked neck, like that of an old fowl's, had brought his face into the light. It was long, and run to seed, with a large, red nose; its thin, colourless lips were twisted sideways and split apart, showing the semi-toothlessness of his mouth; and his eyes had the peculiar aged look of eyes in which all the colour has run into a little, hard rim round the iris, and over them kept coming a film like the film that comes over the eyes of a parrot. He was, or would properly have been, clean shaven. His hair—for he had removed his hat to take out a clay pipe—was thick and lank, of a dusty colour, and as far as Shelton could see without a speck of gray; the scrupulous parting in the middle produced a laughable incongruity with the rest of the visage.

'But I can put up with that,' he began again. 'I never interferes with nobody, and so nobody doesn't interfere with me; but what frightens me'—and his voice grew steady, as if terrified out of its shake—'is never knowin' from day to day what's to become of yer. Oh, that's dreadful, that is!'

'It must be,' said Shelton.

'Ah ! it is,' said the old fellow ; 'and the winter comin' on. I never was much used to the open air, bein' in domestic service all my life ; but I don't mind that, so long as I can see my way to earn a livin'. Well, thank God ! I've got a job at last ;' and his voice grew suddenly cheerful. 'Sellin' papers is not what I been accustomed to ; but the *St. Paul*, they tell me that's one of the most respectable of the evenin' papers—in fact, I know it is. And now I'm sure to get on ; I try hard.'

'How did you get the job ?' asked Shelton.

'I've got my character,' said the old fellow, making a gesture with a skinny hand towards his chest, as if he kept his character there like a piece of portable property.

'Thank God, nobody can't take that away ! I never parts from that ;' and, fumbling, he produced a packet of letters, holding first one, then another to the light, and he looked anxiously at Shelton. 'In that house where I been sleepin' they're not honest ; they've stolen a parcel of my things—a lovely shirt an' a pair of beautiful gloves that a gentleman gave me for holdin' his horse. Now wouldn't you prosecute them ?'

'It depends on what you can prove.'

'I know they had 'em. A man must stand up for his rights ; that's only proper. I can't afford to lose beautiful things like them. I think I ought to prosecute them, don't you, sir ?'

Shelton could barely restrain a smile.

'There !' said the old fellow, smoothing a piece of paper and shakily holding it out, 'that's Sir James !' and his withered finger-tip trembled on the middle of the page : "Joshua Creed, in my service five years as butler, during which time I have found him all that a

servant should be.' And this 'ere,' he pursued, fumbling with another—'this 'ere's Lady Glengow: "Joshua Creed—" I thought I'd like you to read 'em since you've been so kind.'

'Will you have a pipe?'

'Thank ye, sir,' replied the old butler, filling his clay from Shelton's pouch, and laying it on the bench beside him. He then took hold of a front tooth and began to feel it tenderly, working it backwards and forwards with a sort of pride.

'My teeth's a-coniin' out now,' he said; 'but I enjoys pretty good health for a man of my age.'

'How old is that?'

'Seventy-two! Barrin' my cough, and my rupture, and this 'ere affliction'—he passed his hand over his face—'I've nothing to complain of; everybody has somethink, it seemis. I think I'm a wonder for my age, don't you, sir?'

Shelton, for all his pity, would have given the world to laugh.

'Seventy-two!' he said; 'it's a great age. You remember the country when it was very different to what it is now?'

'Ah!' said the old butler, 'there was gentry then; I remember them drivin' down to Newmarket (my native place, sir) with their own horses. There wasn't so much o' this here *middle* class then. There was more, too, o' what you might call the milk o' human kindness in people then—none o' them Amalgamated Stores, every man keepin' his own little shop; not so eager to cut his neighbour's throat, as you might say. And then look what a change in the price of bread! Oh dear! why, it isn't a quarter what it was then!'

'And are people happier now than they were?' asked Shelton.

The old butler sucked desperately at his pipe.

'No,' he continued, shaking his head; 'they've lost the contented spirit. I see people runnin' here and runnin' there, readin' books and findin' out things; they ain't not so self-contented as they were.'

'Is that possible?' thought Shelton.

'No,' repeated the old man, again sucking at his pipe, and this time blowing out a volcano-full of smoke; 'I don't see as much happiness about, not the same look on the faces. 'Tisn't likely. See these 'ere motor-cars, too; they say 'orses is goin' out altogether;' and as if dumfounded at his own conclusion, he sat silent for some time, exclusively engaged in lighting and relighting his pipe.

The girl at the far end of the seat stirred, cleared her throat hoarsely, and settled down again; her movement disengaged an odour of frowsy clothes. The policeman approached and scrutinized the three faces in turn; his broad visage wore an expression of jovial contempt, which was instantly modified by curiosity when his glance lighted on Shelton.

'There's good men in the police,' said the old butler, when the policeman had passed on—'there's good men in the police, as good men as you can see, and there's them that treats you like dirt—a dreadful low class of man. Oh dear, yes! when they see you down in the world, they think they can speak to you as they like; but I don't give them no chance to worry me. I keep myself to myself, and speak civil to all the world. Oh, you have to hold the candle to them; for, oh dear! if they're crossed—some of them, they're a dreadful unscrupulous lot!'

'Are you going to spend the night here ?'

'It's nice and warm to-night,' replied the old butler.

'I said to the man at that dreadful low place, I said : "Don't you ever speak to me again," I said, "and don't you come near me!" Straightforward and honest's been my motto through life, and I don't want to have nothing to say to them fellows'—he made an annihilating gesture—'after the way they treated me, takin' my things like that. To-morrow I shall get a room. I can get a room for three shillin's a week, don't you think so, sir? Well, then I shall be all right. I'm not afraid now; the mind at rest. So long as I can keep myself, that's all I want. I shall do first rate, I think;' and he stared at Shelton, but the look in his eyes and the half-scared optimism of his voice convinced the latter that he was in dread of something. 'So long as I can keep myself,' he repeated complacently, 'I shan't need no workhouse, and I shan't lose my respectability.'

'No workhouse,' thought Shelton; and for some time he sat without speaking. 'When you have time,' he said at last, 'come and see me; here's my card.'

The old butler returned to consciousness with a jerk, for he had begun to nod.

'Thank ye, sir; I will,' he said, with pitiful alacrity. 'Down by Belgravia? Oh, I know it well; I lived down in them parts with a gentleman of the name of Bateson—perhaps you knew him; he's dead now—the Honourable Bateson. Thank ye, sir; I'll be sure to come;' and snatching at his battered hat, he toilsomely secreted Shelton's card with the rest of his character. Five minutes later he had again begun to nod.

Shelton, too, relapsed into reverie. Poor old chap! As naive and complacent as any Pharisee!

The policeman passed for the second time, and his gaze seemed to say, ‘Now, what *is* a gentleman doing on that seat with those two rotters?’

‘Ah!’ thought Shelton, catching his eye; ‘exactly! You don’t know what to make of me—a man of my “class” sitting here! Poor devil! to spend your days spying on your fellow-creatures! Poor devil! But you don’t *know* that you’re a poor devil, and so you’re not one.’

The man on the next bench sneezed—a shrill, disapproving sneeze.

‘Exactly,’ thought Shelton. ‘Why on earth did I pity the bobby?’

The policeman passed for the third time, and, once more assuring himself that the two lower creatures were harmlessly dozing, spoke to Shelton:

‘It’s not very safe on these ’ere benches,’ said he; ‘you never know who you may be sittin’ next to. If I were you, sir, I should be gettin’ on—if you’re not goin’ to spend the night here, that is;’ and he laughed, as at an excellent joke.

Shelton looked at him, and itched to say: ‘Why shouldn’t I, bobby?’ but it struck him that it would sound very odd. ‘Besides,’ he thought, ‘I shall only catch a cold;’ and, without speaking, he left the seat, and passed through the gates to go to his rooms.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE END

HE reached his rooms at midnight so exhausted that, without waiting to light up, he dropped into a chair in the dark sitting-room. The curtains and blinds had been removed for cleaning, and the tall windows admitted the stare of the night outside. Shelton fixed his eyes on it, as one lost man might fix his eyes upon another.

An unaired, dusty odour clung about the room, but, like one of those God-sent whiffs of grass or flowers wafted to one sometimes in the streets, a perfume came to his nostrils, the spice from the withered ragged carnation still clinging to his buttonhole; and he suddenly awoke once more to the fact that he had a decision to make. He got up and lighted a candle; the dust was thick on everything he touched. ‘Ugh!’ he thought, ‘how wretched!’ and the sensation of loneliness that had seized him on the stone seat at Holm Oaks the day before returned with redoubled force.

On his table, heaped indiscriminately, were a pile of bills and circulars. He opened them, tearing at their covers with the random haste of a man back from a holiday. A single long envelope was placed apart from the rest for forwarding.

‘MY DEAR DICK (he read),

‘I enclose you herewith the revised draft of your marriage settlement. It is now shipshape. Return it before the end of the week, and I will have it engrossed for signature. I go to Scotland next Wednesday for a month’s holiday; shall be back in good time for your wedding. My love to your mother when you see her.

‘Your affectionate uncle,

‘EDMUND PARAMOR.’

Shelton smiled, and took out the draft.

‘This Indenture made the day of , 189—, between Richard Paramor Shelton——’

He put it down again and sank back in his chair, the chair in which Ferrand had been wont to sit on those mornings when he came to expound his philosophy.

He did not stay there long, but in sheer unhappiness got up, and, taking a candle, roamed about the rooms, fingering those things that had not been put away, and gazing in the mirror at his face, which seemed to him repulsively wretched-looking. He went out at last into the hall and opened the door, with the intention of returning downstairs into the street; but a sudden appreciation of the fact that, street or house, town or country, he would have to take his trouble along with him, caused him to shut it abruptly. He felt in the letter-box, drew forth a letter, and with this in his hand went back to the sitting-room.

It was from Antonia. And such was his excitement that he was obliged to take two or three turns between the window and the wall opposite before he could read

it ; then, with a heart beating so that he could barely hold the paper, he commenced.

It began without a name :

'I was wrong to ask you to go away. I see now that it was breaking my promise, and I didn't mean to do that. I don't know why things have come to be so different. You never think as I do about anything.'

'I had better tell you that that letter of Monsieur Ferrand's to mother was impudent. Of course you didn't know what was in it ; but when Professor Brayne was asking you about him at breakfast, I felt that you believed that he was right and we were wrong, and I can't understand it. And then in the afternoon, when that woman hurt her horse, it was all as if you were on her side. How can you feel like that ?'

'I must say this, because I don't think I ought to have asked you to go away, and I want you to believe that I will keep my promise ; I should feel that you and everybody else had a right to condemn me. I was awake all last night, and have a bad headache this morning. I can't write any more.'

'ANTONIA.'

His first sensation on reading this letter was a sort of stupefaction of relief that had in it an odd element of anger. He was reprieved ! She would not break her promise ; she considered herself bound ! But in the midst of the feverish exaltation of this thought he smiled, and the smile was not a success.

He read the letter again, and, like a judge criticising a piece of evidence, began to weigh what she had said,

the thoughts in her head when she was writing, and the facts which had led up to this climax.

That farewell document of the young foreigner had done the business. True to his fatal gift of divesting things of their clothing, Ferrand had not vanished without showing up his benefactor in his true colours ; and even to Shelton himself those colours were made plain. Antonia instinctively felt that he was a traitor to her, and sounding his heart even at that moment of stress and indecision, he knew that this was true.

'And then in the afternoon, when that woman hurt her horse——' That woman ! 'It was as if you were on her side !'

He saw Antonia's mind, the clear rigidity of it, its intuitive perception of that with which it was not safe to be sympathetic, its instinct for self-preservation, its spontaneous contempt for those who had not that instinct. And she had written those words considering herself bound to *him*—a man capable of sentiment, of rebellious sympathies, of a sort of untidiness of principle ! Here was the answer to the question he had been asking himself all day : 'How had things come to this pass ?' and he began to feel compassion for her.

Poor child ! She could not jilt him ; there was something so vulgar in the word ! It should not be said that Antonia Dennant had deliberately accepted a man and deliberately thrown him over. These things were not done ! They were impossible ! At the bottom of his heart he had a deep and unconscious sympathy with this impossibility.

A third time he read the letter, which seemed now to be impregnated with a fresh meaning, and the anger which had mingled with his first sensation of relief

detached itself and grew in force. There was something tyrannous in that letter, a denial of his right to think for himself. It was like a finger pointed at him as an unsound person. And with a shock the conviction was forced on him that in marrying her he would be marrying not only her, but her class—his own class. She would always be there to keep him up to the mark, to force him to look upon her and himself, and all the people they knew and all the things they did, with complacency ; she would always be there to force him to consider himself superior to everyone whose life was not cast in their own moral mould. Ah yes ! to consider himself superior, not blatantly, not consciously, but with a sort of subconscious self-righteousness.

But this anger of his, which resembled the paroxysm that two days before had made him mutter at the Authority on Art, ‘I hate your d——d superiority,’ struck him all at once as impotent and ludicrous. What was the good of being angry ? He was on the point of losing her ! And the sheer physical anguish of that thought, reacting on his anger, intensified it three-fold. She was so certain of herself, so superior to her emotions, to her natural impulses—superior to her very desire to be free from him. But of *that* fact, at all events, Shelton had no longer any doubt. It was beyond doubt, beyond argument. She did not really love him ; she wanted to be free of him !

A photograph had hung in his bedroom at Holm Oaks of a group round the hall door ; Mrs. Dennant, the Honourable Charlotte Penguin, Lady Bonington, Halidome, Mr. Dennant, the stained-glass man—all were there ; and on the left-hand side, looking straight in front of her, Antonia. Her face in its youthfulness,

more than all those others, expressed their immutable point of view. Behind those calm young eyes lay a whole world of safety and tradition. ‘I am not as others,’ they seemed to say.

He thought of that photograph, and Mr. and Mrs. Dennant singled themselves out; he could see their faces as they talked over the situation—their faces with a look on them of concern, a peculiar, uneasy, dislocated look—and hear the ring of their voices, still decisive, but a trifle acid, as if they had had a quarrel:

‘He’s made an ass of himself!’

‘Ah! it’s too distressin’!’

He felt a deep wound—he had been inflicting himself on *them*, too. They, too, thought him unsound, didn’t want him; but to save the situation they would have been glad to keep him. *She* didn’t want him, but she refused to forfeit her right to say: ‘Commoner girls may break their promises, but *I* will not!’ He sat down at the table between the candles with his head on his hands. And the grief that was anger and the anger that was grief grew and grew within him. Her refusal to free herself had thrown that duty upon him! She was ready to marry him without love as a sort of duty to her ideal of herself.

Ah! no! she hadn’t, after all, the monopoly of pride!

As if she actually stood before him, he could see the shadows under her eyes that he had dreamed of kissing, the eager movements of her lips. His throat contracted, his eyes grew sore; for several minutes he remained without moving hand or limb. Then once more his anger blazed up. She was going to sacrifice herself and—him! All the virility, all the manhood in him, scoffed at such a sacrifice. That was not exactly what he wanted!

He went to the bureau, took paper and envelope, and, sitting down once more at the table, wrote as follows:

'There never was, is not, and never would have been any question of promise between us. I should be a cad to trade on any such thing. You are absolutely free. Our engagement is at an end by mutual consent.'

'RICHARD SHELTON.'

He sealed it, and as he sat with his hands between his knees, that imagined verdict of Mr. Dennant's rang in his ears like a refrain. His forehead drooped lower and lower to the table, till at last by some fate it reposed on the long and legal document of his Marriage Settlement. And he had a sensation of relief, like a man who drops from fatigue at the end of a journey.

THE END



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